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Thesis Title

“Beating the Boundaries: An Exploration of BDSM as Religioneing”

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Abstract

The focus of this research is an exploration of BDSM experience as it emerges from the complex interactions of kink activities and relationships. It argues that practices which are ostensibly not religious can be understood as contributing to personal processes of religioning. Enriching debates about living religion, I offer the idea of gestalt as a tool to address the question of how examples of a given practice which is a part of religioning might be distinguished from those where it is not. A gestalt is something felt to be more or other than the sum of its constituent parts; it is an emergent, felt quality that is neither perceptual nor cognitive. A sense of gestalt arises unpredictably from an individual's whole experience of a given phenomenon as it is integrated into their world and, when it appears, it changes the value, significance and meaning of the phenomenon. Thus, kink experience is presented as a crucible where personal outcomes and meaning can be distilled from the concentrated matter therein. I argue that the significance of a given experience is not located solely within any intrinsic quality ascribed to it, rather, it is in what the experiencer subsequently constructs from the refined experience.

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This is for my Master, who is the safe place from where I can explore and to whom I can always return.

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1 – Introduction: Processes of Religioning

All [religions] claimed to be the one true way. For me they were not. Do not get me wrong, my way is not your way, and that is the way of it. How one searches for the reason they exist, the way that allows them to come close or to touch the divine is individual... The world of, as some call it, kink, is my world. I do not consider it kink, nor off centre. I consider it the basis of the human condition that we have forgotten.

– (Master Dennis, 2010 pp.30-31)

I never aspired to be a 'Dominatrix' per se, but I knew from the dawn of my BDSM explorations that this calling was bigger, deeper and more powerful than any mainstream view could represent it.

– (Minax, 2010 p.226)

As a newly qualified teacher of Religious Studies the first Scheme of Work I wrote was for introducing year 7 to the study of religion at key stage 3.¹ This was to be via the topic *Religion: What and Why?* My overall key stage 3 curriculum changed over the years but that topic always remained in place. During those lessons the students and I considered the important and complex questions of what religion might be, and why it matters sufficiently in the contemporary world to deserve study. We identified common themes across the boundaries of institutional religion, pondered how 'the religious' and 'the everyday' intersect and interact, and reflected on whether there is any single thing all religion shares.

At much the same time a prospective partner ruled themselves out of my long-term future by declaring themselves unwilling to trespass, even temporarily and with

¹ Key stage 3 is years 7-9, pupils aged 11-14

enthusiastic consent, upon my status and bodily integrity. The refusal (to which they were fully entitled) was loaded with judgements about the mental health of people interested in such trespass; equality and the avoidance of pain were presented as not only desirable, but as absolute moral goods, with self-evident meaning and forms of expression that it would be insanity to question. I had never encountered such an absolute rejection of kink before. My own sanity did not seem to me to be in doubt, but my desire to explore pain, power and helplessness were undeniable and previous positive experiences suggested I was not unique in this. I began to ask, for the first time, why people want to play with pain and power, and why that desire felt sufficiently important that to reject *it* constituted rejecting *me*.

These two sets of questions seemed wholly separate at the time but both stayed with me. My thoughts on each unfolded gradually over the years: through discussion in the classroom, on social networks, with friends and colleagues; through personal experiences and encounters with different forms and expressions of pain, of kink, and of religion; through academic study and a diversity of reading material. I came at last to think of these questions as being connected, as each in fact containing at least part of the answers to the other. In this thesis I explore that connection and, in that exploration, I offer my response to those initial questions.

Umbrella Terms

BDSM and religion are both complex and multivalent concepts, and both are often discussed as obvious, clearly delineated categories with impermeable edges. If they are so it should be a simple matter to decide whether a given example is inside or outside of those boundaries. I am doubtful any such pristine categories exist in relation to human activities but, whether they do or not, neither BDSM nor religion is among them. I see both as umbrellas, under which huddle a broad and diverse range of concepts, phenomena,

artefacts, communities and behaviours. The people beneath these umbrellas do not all share a common understanding of purpose, or of what the activities they do are 'really' all about; some will reflect deeply on that, while for others it is wholly unimportant. The activities on which they reflect (or don't) also vary in many ways. For some the relevant activity takes place within a dedicated space, set up and equipped for that purpose; for others what they do is what they do, and location or equipment is incidental. Some people routinely practice in a particular way, and some simply mark particular occasions or utilise a practice as a means of engaging with a community. Some people may choose to create a sharp and clear line between what is under the umbrella and what is outside of it, but others do not. In short, when the breadth and variety of things which people choose to place under that umbrella is considered, there seems little to unite them into a single category beyond the fact that someone, somewhere has placed it there. Whatever lines are drawn around a category cannot therefore be clearly drawn and absolute, but are fuzzy and permeable. Recognising that a boundary is fuzzy does not render the concepts it seeks to encompass useless, but it means they must be approached more carefully if they are to be useful in terms of understanding what it actually means to say that something is (or might be) within that category.

In highlighting this similarity-in-ambiguity, I do not mean to identify BDSM as *a* religion (by which I mean one of the smaller umbrellas which defines and understands itself as a sub-category of the larger). Instead I dispose of the determiner 'a', which ties the study of religion to the conceptual bundles of belief, practice, text, doctrine, etc. as endorsed by named institutions. This small change recognises religion, or the religious, as an element of human existence shaped to and by individual lives. The religious in this sense is dynamic and fluid, a constant process of exploration and creation which is best thought of as "religioning" (Nye, 2000). This concept of religion as a verb rather than a noun arose against a background of debate about the nature of religion as a category and what Nye

saw as the failure of the study of religion to engage with ethnography, postmodernism and theoretical discourses in related fields of study. In proposing a religioning approach Nye recognised the critique that scholarly uses of religion as *sui generis* made it effectively “the basis of a modern theology” (Fitzgerald, 2000 p.4) rather than a useful analytic category, and that usage of the term tended to deemphasise “difference, history, and socio-political context in favour of abstract essences and homogeneity” (McCutcheon, 1997 p.3). In proposing religioning as an alternative Nye sought to address these concerns as cultural anthropologists have addressed similar critiques of the concept of culture – by recognising that religion “is not something that does, but is instead done”, something that can only be known through manifestation “through being embodied in persons, in actions, in discourses and in particular contexts” (Nye, 2000 p.456). The switch from noun to verb signals a concern with the doing of religion, rather than with naming of religion as a thing with an essence to be talked about. This makes religioning a useful frame for exploring how the religious might manifest through practices which are not part of any such essentialised tradition.

Since the categories of both religion(ing) and BDSM are so ambiguous the distinction between the inside and the outside of their fuzzy boundaries is not clearly found in the labels people choose to apply to what it is they do. Rather, it may be seen in the narratives that result from the practice, in the ways people value and understand their practice, how they site it within their lives, their worlds, and their selves. This fluid kind of category boundary is well recognised by kinky people: individuals may have a preferred terminology to describe their personal tastes and practices but it is generally accepted that “what somebody else is doing is probably not my BDSM but it is theirs... and that's fine.” (poppy).²

² Some submissives choose not to capitalise their names; where they expressed this preference I have respected it.

It is my view that an unambiguous and complete definition of either religion(ing) or BDSM is not possible and any attempt to create such would exclude relevant and useful material from consideration. Therefore, instead of a definition I offer a selection of elements which may be present in specific narratives in differing combinations. BDSM, as represented by my research participants, can be understood as a collection of activities that involve the consensual and conscious use of pain, perceptions about pain, sensation, emotion, restraint, power, perceptions about power or any combination thereof, for psychological, emotional and/or sensory pleasure. The activities involved in BDSM are part of a wider portfolio that includes fetishisation, body modification and fashion choices; individual selections from this portfolio are personal kinks, and kink is also used as a category label.

Religion is the more abstract of the two concepts, and probably the more controversial of the two framings I offer here. It is my view that the sphere of the religious is the best-fit category for human activity which is valued beyond its functionality or end results, that contributes to understandings of self and other (or Other), that offers a source of meaning-, world- or story-making or that gives opportunities for profound, intense and/or transformative experience. In making this claim I recognise that many people who appear to me to use their kink in these ways dislike the term 'religion' and its associations, and so I also state clearly here that I do not intend to impose onto anyone a category label which they reject. I suggest however that much of the antagonism towards the term arises from understandings of "religion-as-a-thing" (Nye, 2000 p.466) with the concomitant expectation that to be religious is to resonate, on some level, with the essential nature of such a thing. By framing the practice of BDSM as religioning I do not say "kink is a religion", nor do I say to my research participants "you are religious". What I say instead is that kink practices can function within individual lives as other forms of religioning do, and so that concept offers an analytical lens through which the meaning and significance attached to

kink by (some) kinky people can be understood. In sum, I suggest that anything that is greater, or other, than the sum of its parts (a gestalt), and of more significance to the individual than any single idea could explain, can be viewed as contributing to that individual's personal processes of religioning.

Gestalt

A discourse of religioning moves away from named religions to look at “religious influences and religious creativities” (Nye, 2000 p.467) as dynamic and ongoing processes. This allows practices not generally placed within the category of religion to be considered as potential contributions to personal processes of religioning. This, in turn, creates the necessity of distinguishing those occasions of a given practice where this is happening from those where it isn't: if anything *can be* religion does that mean that everything *is* religion?

I offer the idea of gestalt as a tool to address this question. Lived religions approaches argue that religion is to be found in practices which contribute to “making the invisible visible, concretising the order of the universe, the nature of human life...and the various dimensions and possibilities of human interiority” (Orsi, 2005 p.73-74), in the “processes of experiencing things of value” (Taves and Bender, 2012 p.2) and in all of the places where people “share, enact, adapt, create and combine the stories out of which they live” (McGuire, 2008b p.99). Given this, anything which makes these contributions can indeed contribute to an individual's personal processes of religioning, but there is no necessity for any particular practice to do so. The point at which a given activity, practice or experience becomes a part of religioning is the point at which emerges a sense of that thing as more than ‘just’ entertainment, leisure, pastime, enjoyment, gratification etc. For some a practice like BDSM is just fun, just release of tension, just sexually arousing, just an adrenaline rush – it is ordinary. But for others it may be all these things and more. It becomes gestalt – that is it is felt to be more or other than the sum of parts which went

into it. The elements which go into the practice remain unchanged but the place it occupies in a person's life and self-understanding is different.

I have named this emergent sense of 'something else', this new sheen given to an otherwise ordinary thread, a sense of that thing as a gestalt. Gestalt is a German word that arrived in the English language in the 1920s, via the academic discipline of psychology. Gestalt Psychology describes a theory of mind that is rooted in the basic German meaning of "an organised whole", a figure or pattern which emerges against the background (Crocker, 1999, Sills et al., 2012). The term has no direct single-word English translation, and carries wider meaning and stronger connotations of significance than its closest putative equivalents (Gregory, 1987). My use of the word gestalt draws on this foundation rather than any of the detailed developments of either Gestalt Psychology (broadly, a theory of knowledge) or Gestalt Therapy (a form of psychotherapy with strongly contested links to Gestalt Psychology). I am not concerned with the psychological processes of perception, nor with the role of conceptual gestalts in psychotherapy although I do share with the latter field an interest in the "'wholes' of meaning" (Sills et al., 2012 p.46) that individuals create in their lives. While I agree with the therapeutic principle that an individual person is always a complete entity within a specific, responsive and highly idiosyncratic context, my focus is not on undoing or repairing specific cognitive gestalts or on exploring how conceptual or perceptual gestalts contribute to health and well-being. I am interested in whole and integrated experiences and the ways they are woven into personal identity, relationship, sense of self and other and processes of meaning-, world- and story-making.

As I use the term, gestalt is a felt quality, a sense of otherness arising from the combined constituent parts that is neither perceptual nor cognitive. It is emergent in that it arises unpredictably from an individual's whole experience of a given phenomenon as it is

integrated into their world, and this creates consequences in terms of value, significance and meaning that do not result from any one part in isolation. This emergence is highly individualised. One person may engage in giving and receiving spanking with their lovers as a part of foreplay because both of them find it sexually arousing and exciting, and that may be all there is to it. For another person the concept of being a 'spanker', 'spankee' or 'spanko' might become a basis for seeking romantic partners or a part of the way in which they understand themselves and their identity. This person may then begin to seek more spanking encounters, outside the context of sexual relationships, resulting in a different kind of fulfilment and satisfaction. The behaviour becomes an end unto itself, rather than a means to an end (Newmahr, 2011b), and the things it brings to the person's life become harder to articulate in words, although they remain clearly felt. This is when BDSM becomes gestalt kink, as it has become more, or other, for the individual than its original parts.

This is the kind of experience and understanding that I discussed with my research participants under the title of 'meaningfulness'; behaviour is meaningful in that it is not trivial, not just any one identifiable thing. This is not meaning in a symbolic sense, nor does it involve any concept of definition or answer to a specific question. It is this which initially led me to search for an alternative term. The concept of gestalt, in the sense of more than the sum of constituent parts, emerged in my research conversation with Griff, as we worked our way through issues of meaningfulness, religion and spirituality. No one else used this precise word, but other conversations did touch on the inadequacy of common words and the shared perception that the significance of their practice was not wholly captured in the words available to describe the experiences they shared with me. I had chosen meaningfulness as an initial descriptor for these feelings, but the perceived connection between meaning and linguistic definition proved a distraction. Describing something as meaningful seems to carry strong connotations of cognition (Ezzy, 2014),

and/or a sense of deliberate purpose behind the activity so described, and I found the term increasingly less appropriate.

I do not claim that gestalt kink is ineffable, unless that term is being used to signal the existence of experiential aspects that are non-linguistic in nature by people aware of the gap between the experience they have had and their ability to describe it in a way that seems adequate to them (Blum, 2012). Regardless of whether this descriptor is employed in relation to a specific experience, the concept of ineffability neither captures the wholeness of the milieu within which that experience was attained, nor does it explain anything about the experience. Further, the association of ineffability with experiences of special or altered consciousness risks masking other factors contributing to the sense of gestalt. Gestalt offers a means of recognising that when focused on a whole, which includes but is not restricted to discrete powerful experiences, there remains something left to know when all the words have run out. With its root meaning of other than the sum of the parts, gestalt captures a quality which emerges from the whole and which can only be grasped properly from a holistic perspective. As I use it here, it describes BDSM that is contributing in multiple and multiplex ways to those processes of self-, world- and story-making that constitute lived religioning.

Religion, Spirituality and Gestalt

It is not my intention to offer gestalt as a single factor sufficient in itself to define all religion. My interest is in the blurry areas where things which began, perhaps, as simple enjoyment or relaxation come, over time, to be woven into individual lives in ways which add 'something else'. I do not suggest that religion cannot be concerned with the practical, or must be somehow always beyond the ordinary; religion can certainly be found in the everyday, as well as in things to which people grant "special meaning" (Taves and Bender, 2012 p.11). But, in order to move something across or through the apparent boundary

between what is religious and what is not, there must be a shift in some aspect of what it is on the not-religious side compared to what it is on the religious side. The acquisition of a kind of specialness, such as a sense of gestalt, offers a basis for such a shift.

Most among my research participants preferred the term 'spirituality' to 'religion' as a descriptor for things which hold such specialness for them. In my view this 'spiritual but not religious' distinction is analytically unhelpful and its usage in this way reflects a moral distinction being drawn between those who are free from oppressive authority and those who remain subject to it (Ammerman, 2013) that I am reluctant to reify. BDSM in general, and more particularly my pool of research participants, includes people who practice BDSM as an aspect of a named tradition that is recognised as 'a religion', people who find BDSM meaningful or transformative but do not refer to it in terms of religiosity, and people who practice explicitly labelled 'spiritual kink'. The experiences of these people could be considered to fall within different categories. But since they speak of their experiences in comparable terms and communicate that sense of special value, regardless of where they place themselves in relation to terms such as religious or spiritual, I have chosen not to separate them according to these labels.

What the term gestalt offers is a means to distinguish practice which contributes to the process of religioning from practice which does not, regardless of where individual practitioners are placed in relation to these complex and contested terms. It enables a consideration of the specialness which is common in the accounts of practitioners to be understood as something which is emergent from but distinct to the whole, and which gains this lustre of the special without necessarily relying on a transcendent Other, a particular worldview or an established cultural tradition to provide it.

Outline of Chapters

The term gestalt makes best sense in relation to the whole of the phenomenon with which it is associated, but the necessity of critical analysis requires the clear identification of conceptual strands within that whole. This has shaped the structure of this thesis, with the concept of gestalt serving as a spine from which the themes explored in the chapters descend. Thus, each theme can be understood and explored separately in relation to BDSM, while also being one strand among the many which contribute to the whole of the gestalt. The selected themes do not constitute an exhaustive list of all possible strands which could be woven into personal gestalt kink, but they are the themes which emerged most strongly from my research conversations.

The thesis begins by establishing a picture of what BDSM is and involves. *Setting the Scene* outlines the choice and usage of the term BDSM and its relationship to its wider context of culture, law and sex. Having clarified what constitutes the category of behaviours with which the thesis is concerned, the next two chapters locate the research in broader academic contexts. *Siting My Research: Literature* includes a summary of existing academic work on BDSM as well as a consideration of relevant concepts drawn from the discipline of religious studies. The second contextual chapter, *Siting My Research: Approaches and Methods*, locates the research in relation to myself and to the approaches I chose for carrying it out.

The next chapters are concerned with the consideration and analysis of the material collected during the research, and the themes explored in them are the strands from which the whole gestalt is woven. *What it is We Do* offers, without comment, descriptions of BDSM experience. This is included to assist in addressing the question of how exactly play might progress and what happens within play-spaces, and to avoid the sense of ‘yes, but what do they actually *do*?’ which can be left by definitions alone.

I then devote two chapters to the experience of play. The first, *Making Spaces*, introduces the concept of play as the core activity of BDSM; it is not a single thing but a process of combining many different activities into unique scenes. Beginning with participants' understandings of the imperfect term 'play', and the ideas that are communicated by it, the chapter outlines the intimate, relational and dynamic processes of play. Through the actions of the players a cycle of sensation and response is created, carving out a space that feels qualitatively distinct from 'ordinary' or 'everyday' spaces and is therefore experienced as distinct. The fact that the lifestyle couples among my research participants also engage in play, and experience it in this qualitatively different way is significant and helps shape an understanding of play as 'an Experience' – a set of events, sensations etc. around which a line can be drawn to mark them off from the flow of everyday experiences. Play can be seen as performing aspects of the self and relationship explicitly that might at other times be suppressed, hidden or simply less overt.

The second play chapter, *Inside Play-Spaces*, explores the nature and qualities of experiences inside them. The limited literature which exists on 'spiritual BDSM' locates the spiritual possibilities of kink wholly within its potential to create experiences of transcendence. I agree that BDSM has this potential, but my research suggests that qualities scholars have ascribed to exceptional play events are common to any successful play, and transcendence is only one of a range of possible peaks of experience. Other important elements within the experience of play-spaces include the forging and expression of relationship and intimacy and a sense of deep connection between play partners. These, together with the sense of being immersed in another world, contribute to the sense of BDSM as gestalt.

Subcultural Identity considers what constitutes a subculture and the utility of this concept in relation to the BDSM community. Kink, and all of the different strands which

feed into a sense of it as gestalt, takes place within the wider context of society. That contemporary society is hypermodern, continuing the trends of modernity to what might once have been considered extremes. This chapter explores kink in this context, in relation to issues of subculture, identity, style and authenticity.

The next chapter, *Kinky Bodies*, considers the nature of the body and its involvement in the creation of experience. Bodies are presented as multi-sensory, with senses braided together into a synaesthetic dynamic whole rather than separate from one another. Movement/animation as the foundation of bodily experience is explored in the context of BDSM and the complexities of kink experience are drawn out. The idea of the medium as the message (McLuhan, 1964, Seligman et al., 2008) – that the meaning, purpose or point of BDSM play is to play – is introduced here, to indicate the importance of bodies in their full multi-sensory kinetic reality as part of the gestalt of BDSM.

Beating the Boundaries considers the role of edges and limits within BDSM play, suggesting that BDSM allows the exploration of many different kinds of edges and boundaries, including the transgression of social norms. This kind of exploration is part of what contributes to perceptions of BDSM as powerful and transformative.

Kink Ritualising then draws together the idea of the medium as the message with boundary exploration and the expression of relationship. It presents BDSM as a process of ritualising, that is a deliberate engaging in practices which contribute to processes of religioning. The ways in which a sense of gestalt is expressed all speak to this – the medium is the message; the point of play is to play. To experience the self as whole and embodied, to explore and transgress boundaries, to forge relationships and experiment with trust and reliance on another as a means of understanding the self and world in which one finds that self are elements which contribute to a sense of kink as gestalt in the same way a successful ritual becomes gestalt. It is other than the simple sum of its parts. It is not

concerned with the symbolic or the abstract; rather the point of doing it is to do it, to have done it, to know that one has done it, and to retain the potential to do it again.

The final chapter *Gestalt Kink, Gestalt Religion* draws these separate strands back together again to present the idea of BDSM as a gestalt, involved in a lived process of religioning and to suggest ways gestalt might contribute further to the study of religion and religious practice.

2 – Setting the Scene

I've been hunting for religion for as long as I can remember, searching for something I can do more than pretend to believe in... On some level I crave spirituality with the same depth of longing as I had for leather from my earliest memories of desire. This is the kind of longing that wraps your heart in intricate bondage, from which there is no escape.

– (Lowrey, 2010 pp.7-8)

'What is BDSM?' is not a simple question to answer. This is amply demonstrated by the inclusion of a section, with some variation of this question as a title, near the beginning of most writing on the subject. Most of these refer to the idea of a compound acronym, or what online dictionary Urbandictionary.com calls an "overlapping abbreviation" (Tanos, 2003), that stands for some combination of Bondage and Discipline, Domination and submission, Sadism and Masochism, or Sadoomasochism and (possibly) slave and Master.³ This is usually noted as a basic definition and related, as a whole, to power exchange as in this example:

The letters 'BDSM' represent an open-ended range of practices and expressions – including many forms of restraint, sensory stimulation, role-playing, and interpersonal dynamics. These activities are usually erotic at some level but may not involve genital intercourse. 'BDSM' derives from a combination of the letters 'B&D' for bondage and discipline (corporal punishment), and 'S&M'... which typically involves pain and/or humiliation... the letters 'D&S' in the middle can stand for Dominance and submission (D/s). Since both B&D and S&M usually

³ Capitalising Dom/Domme and not submissive or sub (or equivalent power-exchange roles) is a convention within the scene.

involve at least temporary dominance by one person over another who submits to the former's control most people in the BDSM world these days view it as a kind of three-ring circus where participants can either move around or stay focussed on just one or two rings. (Rudel and Fairfield, 2014 p.1-2)

The letters derive from some of the activities in which kinky people engage, and each term can be defined further: bondage “refers to the act of restricting the movement of a person. Bondage can be physical or symbolic and may involve many different methods” (Love, 1992 p.67).

Bondage is arguably the easiest to define of any of the component terms in the acronym. But the potential diversity of its forms is evidenced by the fact that the previously quoted definition runs for 14 pages, includes 24 sub-categories, and yet still omits multiple bondage practices. The interlinking and overlapping of bondage with the other more abstract terms covered by the BDSM acronym thus amply demonstrates the challenges of arriving at a sufficient answer to the apparently simple question of what this thing called BDSM actually is.

This chapter will explore the complexities of the concept. It explains the choice and usage of the term BDSM and the meanings it carried for my research participants, as well as considering the range and scope of activities which fit beneath this umbrella. The different roles taken during BDSM play and the relationship between BDSM and power exchange are explored and the common assumption that BDSM is inevitably sexual in nature, with sexual gratification being its primary aim, is critiqued.

Submission) (Weille, 2002), Kink (Dominguez JR, 2004), and Radical Sex Practice (Thompson, 1991). Looking at how the community describes itself and the types of relationship within it offers further options – D/s (Dominance and submission), M/s (Master/Mistress and slave), DD (Domestic Discipline), Leather/Leathersex and Power Exchange.

These may appear to label different things but, when one moves from the chosen term to the specifics included under that title, there does not seem to be any essential difference between the catalogues of behaviour with which these different studies are concerned. The chosen term might be expected to have an effect on who will volunteer to participate in the work, who will choose to read it and who will see themselves in the final analysis, but the range of activities and forms of relationship practised by my participants suggests that most people who identified with the term BDSM for my research would also recognise the things that they do in the categories delineated by work which selected a different term. All such terms can therefore be understood as hypernyms, within which many combinations of kinks might be found. Any discussions between potential play partners would require much greater clarity as to what was and was not acceptable activity than any such over-arching term could provide.

My choice to use BDSM as my key term represents a conscious desire to encompass the broadest possible range of activities. My participants are individuals who recognised themselves in that term sufficiently to respond to my request for participants. For some it was not their chosen term to describe themselves; many preferred the term kink. However, the ways in which these are two terms are used does not quite reflect the perception that they are wholly interchangeable. As used, kink is certainly the broader term, covering the entire array of behaviours and relationship associated with fetish, BDSM, D/s, DD etc.; it is also used as an indicator of individual placement within that larger

milieu. Individuals thus speak of ‘their kink(s)’ – an individual portfolio of interests and associations drawn from the larger pool of all kinks and woven into self-understanding and identity. BDSM is closer to a synonym for play, as a general descriptor for the performative elements of kink or the practising into existence of one's personal kinks.

The Scene

I know I feel more comfortable knowing that there are other people
who are at least similar to me.

– Barry

You're all in the same boat, and you all have the same kind of
interests and that's where the spiritual love comes in I suppose... you
can just openly talk to a total stranger about what you're going to
do to your partner... and everyone is just so confident in what
they're doing.

– Twisted

Scott posits BDSM “both as a concept and a reality, an abstract space which bodies and minds occupy in private, as well as a community publicly inhabited by a cross-section of imperfect people”(2015 p.8). This distinction is useful. My work is primarily concerned with the activity of ‘doing’ BDSM, usually called ‘play’, which involves the private spaces occupied by bodies and minds (even when it takes place in a semi-public setting). I also needed the public community, to enable me to find these individuals, and to understand what they might share with one another. Given the contested terminology which characterises both the study and the practice of BDSM it is hard to imagine how a community might come to exist, and yet it does. On the surface interests appear highly idiosyncratic and specific. Plummer (2015) spoke of his early (unpublished) research into sadomasochism and how he despaired of finding any connection between the practices of

the different individuals who responded to his call for participants. If I looked purely at what people say they enjoy doing I would experience similar frustration in identifying a common thread between my own research participants. But they do have something in common – they all responded to a request from me asking for conversations about the experience of BDSM, in the same way that Plummer's respondents answered his call for conversations about sadomasochism. Each of them connected with that key term, even if in so doing it became important to them to explain why it was not the best term. They recognised how their practices could be placed beneath that umbrella and it is this recognition that also connects them to one another. Individuals do have preferred terminology to describe their personal tastes and practices, but most people within the community also recognise the overlapping and contested nature of its different concepts and terminology. The Scene comes into being through the flow of debate and discussion, located in a particular social, spatial and discursive milieu and the perception of a shared core interest or group of interests (Moberg and Ramstedt, 2016).

The kink Scene is thus a single entity, comprised by diverse and overlapping sub-groups. It is a self-identifying group of people who see themselves as interested in behaviours outside the norms of bodily behaviour and inter-personal interactions espoused by “conventional society” (Sheff and Hammers, 2011 p.199). The community recognises itself “through a shared, yet contested, language” (Weiss, 2011 p.vii) in which different terms may be used interchangeably or with overlapping meanings in the context of varied relationships, practices and roles. It overlaps with other Scenes which share a specific focus, such as body modification. Some people with a particular interest, such as Corporal Punishment (CP), might choose to separate themselves from the label of BDSM, but the kink community recognises and welcomes CP enthusiasts alongside all the other activities encompassed within it and many individuals who do connect with it practice CP, either exclusively or alongside other activities.



2: Implements for CP

BDSM is undoubtedly a fuzzy category, but it is one which functions practically – the community exists, people find it. They engage and identify with it, they reject it, or they create a special interest group within it. They critique it and contribute to it, construct identities around and in relation to it and find other members of it with whom they can engage in mutually satisfying play. It is a category which has meaning, even if it lacks a universally agreed title, or easily describable core element. I have chosen to engage with this category as it functions for the community, accepting anyone who identifies with the term BDSM in any way into my pool of research participants.

‘What It Is We Do’

You can't generalise. People are like 'what do you do?' and they expect 'I do CBT, nipple play'. Bollocks!... I'm like it's not about what

equipment I have. It's about me, it's about you. And you are the most important thing when you come to see me.

– Cee

“What it is we do” (WIIWD) is sometimes offered by practitioners as a definition of their activity. In other words, if someone considers themselves to be doing BDSM then that is what s/he is doing. This is effectively the definition I adopted in seeking and talking with my research participants. However, while it reflects the recognition of diversity of practice and honours the contested nature of other possible labels, it is not entirely helpful in clarifying (for someone wholly outside of the Scene) what kind of activities might be involved. Scott observes that the subtleties of real-life kink are strikingly absent from portrayals of it in popular media, instead what is presented feeds the “multiple misunderstandings” relating to BDSM, which she summarises as the view that it is “sick, freaky, deviant and wrong” (2015 pp.8, 12). This kind of perception leads some people to reject the term BDSM, even while recognising that their practice could be described by that term.

For many people BDSM takes place in specific intervals of time, scenes or sessions, in which people play with “various techniques to put one partner, the submissive, in a position of helplessness and vulnerability, and the other, the dominant, in a position of command and authority” (Miller and Devon, 1995 p.4). It is this idea which is most familiar in popular representations of kink. But my participants included a broader range: lifestyle D/s couples, whose entire relationship is structured around a power differential (at least one of these relationships did not involve any kind of play); individuals who were not interested in power exchange at all or who enjoyed switching roles within a scene (as distinct from those who are happy in either role, but maintain it for the entirety of a specific scene); individuals who engaged in age-play with no element of physical discipline

and no explicit desire for power or vulnerability; individuals who practiced their kink by themselves. Miller and Devon's understanding (self-described as representative of their own relationship) is therefore inadequate to describe the activities of my research participants.

It is this kind of complexity which led Weiss (2011) not to attempt a formalised definition of BDSM, with the implication being that we know it when we see it – an observation also sometimes made about religion (Nongbri, 2013). This may be a tempting course but it carries the risk of allowing misunderstandings and distortions to go unchecked as what is seen may be conflated with non-consensual violence, or judged according to mental health stereotypes. Familiarity with the British legal case of *R v Brown* (1993) illustrates what is potentially at stake for individuals engaged in BDSM and why they might prefer not to rely on people recognising what they see.⁴ In this case a group of men were convicted of assault amounting to actual bodily harm, and the abetting of such assault, following fully consensual and mutually pleasurable practices. None of the individuals involved had complained to the police or required medical assistance but the case was brought because the police had uncovered video of the activities and, in watching it, what they recognised was criminal violence at levels that created the concern that lives were at risk. Weiss suggests that contemporary practitioners understand their BDSM to be “about mutual pleasure and power-exchange” (2011 p.viii-ix), but in his judgement of this case Lord Justice Templeman saw “the indulgence of cruelty by sadists and the degradation of victims” (1993 p.83). Lord Justice Mustill, although part of the minority in favour of overturning the conviction, observed he was thankful only a few practices were relevant to the appeal as “whatever the outsider might feel about the subject matter of the prosecutions—perhaps horror, amazement or incomprehension, perhaps sadness—

⁴ Known as *Spanner*, or the *Spanner Case*

very few could read even a summary of the other activities without disgust.” (1983 p.100).

The Law Lords *did* recognise what they saw as consensual BDSM but they understood it as violence and cruelty, rather than the intimacy and shared pleasure which characterises the ways my participants describe their practice.

In contrast to Weiss most work involving BDSM does offer a definition, even as it recognises that it is probably better “conceptualised as a set of interrelated behaviours where individuals give different emphases to particular themes” (Alison et al., 2001 p.7). Taylor and Ussher's definition is typical, describing “SM” as “comprising those behaviours which are characterised by a contrived, often symbolic, unequable distribution of power involving the giving and/or receiving of physical and/or emotional stimulation. It often involves acts which would generally be considered as ‘painful’ and/or humiliating or subjugating, but which are consensual and for the purpose of sexual arousal, and are understood by the participants to be SM” (2001 p.301). Weille describes “SMDS” in similar terms as involving “shared constructions of consensuality; fantasy enactment through psychodrama; and a symbolised, boundaried context...in which a dominant-submissive exchange of power occurs” (2002 p.134). The element of power exchange is sometimes singled out as a unifying thread across all BDSM activities, but this cannot be sufficient for describing the practice of my participants since some among them explicitly rejected power exchange.

Newmahr has a different emphasis to most of these academic definitions, placing pleasure at the heart of her understanding. She defines “SM” as “the collection of activities that involve the mutually consensual and conscious use, among two or more people, of pain, power, perceptions about power, or any combination thereof, for psychological, emotional or sensory pleasure ... the objective in SM is taken to be, primarily, the experience” (Newmahr, 2011b p.18). This does avoid giving the impression of BDSM as

only ever occurring within a defined scene and it uses the concept of power more broadly than the vulnerability/authority dichotomy suggested by some. It offers the basis for a description of the kinds of practice in which my participants engaged. However, it excludes solo practitioners and implies that pain is the only sensation with which people choose to play. I have therefore modified it to better reflect the activities and relational dynamics of my research participants:

BDSM: A collection of activities that involve the consensual and conscious use of pain, perceptions about pain, sensation, emotion, restraint, power, perceptions about power or any combination thereof, for psychological, emotional and/or sensory pleasure.

This is not intended to function as a definition of BDSM which would cover any selection of people within that community, nor is it meant to summarise all possible qualities of BDSM activity. It offers an overview of the type and nature of the activities in which my research participants engage. Each individual has their own kinks, and engages with them in different ways. Table 1.1 offers a list of some common kinks, from which individuals construct their own portfolio of interests and activities.

Table 1.1 – A Selection of Kinks
24/7 – age play – anal play – asphyxiophilia (breath-play) – bastinado (foot-beating) – birching – blindfolds – blood play – bondage – branding – breast torture – candlewax – caning – chains – chastity – cling film – cock-and-ball torture (CBT) – caging – clamps – consensual nonconsent – coprophilia/scat (faecal play) – cupping – cutting – dacryphilia (tears) – defilement – degradation – depilation – dildos – discipline/domestic discipline (DD) – electro-play – exhibitionism – fear-

play – figging – fire-play – fisting – flogging – forced feminisation – forced orgasm
 – forniphilia (objectification) – hair pulling – handcuffs – humiliation – ice – incest
 – infantilism – klismaphilia (enemas) – knife play – latex – masochism –
 Master/slave (M/s) – medical play – mummification – orgasm control – pain – pegs
 – piercings – pinching – piggy/pony/puppy play – punching – race play – role play
 – rope – sadism – scarification – school – self-bondage – sensory deprivation –
 shibari/kinbaku (rope bondage) – spanking – suspension – tickling – trampling –
 transvestitism – uniforms – urolangia (water-sports) – vacuum bed – violet wand
 – voyeurism – waterboarding – whips – zentai

Is it Sex?

I cannot separate it like most people do. In my early days, I would feel guilty to want to cane my lover during sex. BDSM is very sexual for me, it's how I express deep love and passion.

– Ms Lucy

It started off as something that was that cherry on the cake when it comes to sex. It started off with sex with a bit of kink in. That balance changed over time, for me... At the moment I don't feel an obligation when I'm playing with someone, for there to be sex. But they do slot together rather marvellously.

– Griff

Scholars studying Foucault have seen his proposed “different economy of bodies and pleasures” (Foucault, 1978 p.159) in the practices of BDSM (Halperin, 1995, Miller, 1993). Within such an economy “the ruses of sexuality” (Foucault, 1978 p.159) should no

longer restrain discourse, but it remains the case that BDSM is commonly, one might say almost routinely, placed wholly within “the paradigm of sexuality” (Newmahr, 2010b p.317) and this does restrain discourse since it means both that the idea of sex as a core component of kink is simply not questioned (Alison et al., 2001, Sheff and Hammers, 2011, Stockwell et al., 2010) and/or that individuals who do not understand their kink in sexual terms may be explicitly excluded from consideration in research (Taylor and Ussher, 2001).

It remains a common view that sex is at the core of what BDSM is (Langdridge, 2006) in the same way belief in God is commonly proposed as the essential heart of what religion is. This assumption is problematic firstly because some people view their kink as wholly separate to sex (Newmahr, 2010b) but also, perhaps more significantly, because the question of what sex might be is complex (Christina, 2013) and never satisfactorily addressed. As Wiseman points out in his guide for new players “when two people are alone together, and one of them is naked and tied up and the other is standing over them holding whips and other torture implements, this is not the time to have a serious mismatch of expectations” (1996 p.57). Because participants are approaching the matter critically researchers should do likewise. The alternative to such critical reflection is to limit the ways in which kink behaviour can be discussed and understood, or to restrict the questions that can be asked about it, with the concomitant risk of further pathologising or otherwise de-legitimising the practices of people falling outside of the chosen frame.

Newmahr (2011b) identifies a number of clear problems with unequivocally presenting play as sex – one person is usually fully dressed, and remains so; genital play (if it happens at all) is usually one-sided (and connected with power-plays); kissing is relatively rare during play (although it may be an important part of aftercare); and people often play with individuals they do not find sexually attractive. The observations about the nature and substance of play were broadly supported by my research participants. They also observed

that sex and kink can be combined and related in different ways, not just by different people but by one person in different moods and/or spaces. It is also worth noting a general feeling that play in private might well be more explicitly sexual in nature than in the semi-public settings where Newmahr's research was located; this shift does not necessarily signal a re-categorisation of play as sex within those settings, rather it is an observation that it may look and/or feel more sexual on some occasions than on others. Newmahr does not argue that BDSM is wholly asexual, but that the reality of BDSM play and relationship is far more complex than current narrative allows. Play is not only about physical sensation but explores intimacy with the entire person, beyond or apart from genital contact or nudity, employing sensation, emotion, risk, trust, transgression, boundaries and limits in pursuit of the experience created by the combinations of these elements. In sum, BDSM is not synonymous with sex, and play does not inevitably end up in penetrative sex, or necessarily involve genital stimulation. However, it may become sexual in these ways after the event, or a scene may involve sexual elements including penetration (more commonly with fingers, dildos or other toys than with a penis) and there may be orgasms or orgasm-like experiences for one or both participants. While sex is usually perceived as having a specific aim – orgasm, hopefully mutual – what BDSM appears to seek is a shared experience, with no end goal beyond the intuitive recognition that a scene is finished and the joy that characterises the aftermath of play.

In my unpacking of the concept of BDSM I have emphasised pleasure, and it would be foolish to suggest that this can never be sexual pleasure. But I would argue the opposite extreme would be similarly misleading – it is not *always* or *only* sexual pleasure. That pleasures of different kinds are tangled is clear. That one can be summarised as or reduced to the other is less so. It was common for my research participants to say sex often followed their play, less common to say that sexual stimulation of all parties was part of their play. But when asked if they considered their play to be about sex, or to be sex itself,

almost all of them responded with a negative. By contrast Weinberg et al. (1984) identified a sexual context or shared presumption of sexual meaning as one of 5 elements involved in the definition of an activity as sadomasochism, and such a presumption continues to inform much work on BDSM. Interestingly, they also said that their research participants “did not make SM roles a large part of their lives... and reported more non-SM sex than SM sex” (1984 p.384). My research participants regarded their kink as important, and many shaped their relationships around their kink roles. This difference between two groups of research participants could simply be indicative of distinct approaches in recruitment, but it perhaps demonstrates the spectrum of kink behaviour which ranges from a small part of a sexual repertoire to the engagement in kink behaviour as an end itself. A distinction conceptualised by Newmahr as the difference between “doing” and “loving”: “People who do SM engage in it as a means to a (sexual) end. People who ‘love SM’, by comparison, view SM as an end in and of itself. It may or may not be sexual, and it may be erotic sometimes and not others, but it is always SM” (2010b p.329).

It may be this kind of perspective that underlies the idea of BDSM as a sexuality or sexual orientation, and there are many people within the Scene who describe their kink in this way. It has been observed that the origins of the term sadomasochism are contemporaneous with the origins of terms such as homosexuality, and this is not coincidental. As Thompson says: “both terms were constructed out of medical discourse as a method of social control. Each term was meant to categorise and thus pathologise aspects of human sexual response” (1991 p.xviii). Weiss (2011) suggests that it is this connection with paraphilia and psychopathology that makes more modern terms, such as BDSM and kink, preferable for so many practitioners. Nonetheless it seems that BDSM is somehow more palatable or acceptable to talk about if it is framed in sexual terms, and it is perhaps non-sexual BDSM that is felt as more likely to be pathologised. Certainly connecting it with sexuality and comparing it to homosexuality offers a framework to

follow for legal campaigning and addressing equal rights issues – important concerns given that people have lost their jobs and faced other forms of social discrimination and legal action as a direct result of their BDSM activities being made public (Khan, 2014). Interestingly the judgements in the Spanner case appear to imply that if it were a wholly sexual activity the appeal might have been accepted: Lord Justice Templeman said “there was no evidence to support the assertion that sadomasochist activities are essential to the appellants or to any other participants but the argument would be acceptable if sadomasochism were only concerned with sex.” (1993 p.235). However, a discourse of BDSM as a sexuality repressed by the legal establishment does not necessarily constitute the resistance to power it may appear to be at first glance, since such discourse imposes conceptual limits which remain an element of social control (Foucault, 1978).

In their introduction to *Safe, Sane and Consensual*, Langdridge and Barker state that the contributors to the volume share a “broad” understanding of SM, one that “includes all sexual identities and practices involving pain play, bondage, dominance and submission, and erotic power exchange” (2007b p.11). Elsewhere Langdridge has stated that “at its core, SM, at least, appears to be about sex” (2006 p.380). While the “at least” reference implies that there may be kink activities which are not about sex the definition of SM he chooses makes it hard to see what these might be. Categorisation of this kind is a dismissal of those who frame their activity otherwise, with an implication that they are in denial as to the ‘true’ motives for their play. Newmahr suggests that the sexuality paradigm is privileged because it appears to be the most common among participants, but she also observes that “SM participants who reject a sexual frame are excluded from studies” (2011b p.67). In Taylor and Ussher’s (2001) study individuals who did not define their SM in sexual terms and recognise it as their preferred sexual arousal method were excluded; it is therefore unsurprising that the study found enjoyment of SM activity to be dependent on a sexual context. Alison et al. similarly included both “the frequency of

sadomasochistic sessions and involvement with pornographic material of a similar nature” (2001 p.3) in the requirements for involvement in their study. It is also telling that Sheff and Hammers (2011), in writing about the dearth of minority group representation in extant literature on kink, have themselves implicitly excluded non-sexual players in their definition of the concept. It is equally possible to silence those who do consider their kink to be sex or sexuality by framing it wholly as something else, but this is less prevalent in existing research.

Some authors do note in passing that BDSM may not include sexual arousal or activity. It may also be observed, as Sheff and Hammers (2011) do, that kinky people might understand sex differently. The nature of these passing references is well illustrated by Buenting who makes such an observation in the same paper that suggests BDSM “offers a potentially numinous schema for dealing with the sexual” (2003 p.39), that identifies “BDSM as a system of sexual practices” and her knowledge of those practices as being drawn from “teaching human sexuality courses” (2003 p.40). Having observed that it may not always be sexual, the paper goes on to describe BDSM almost wholly in connection with sex, desire and sexuality, and concludes that BDSM can function as a “transgressive sexual ritual” (2003 p.48). While I do agree with this conclusion I consider it unnecessarily limited by absolute placement of the “rites” of BDSM within the field of “things sexual” (2003 p.48). It seems as if having observed that not everyone conceives of BDSM as sex authors are then relieved of any obligation to consider that perspective further or to broaden the field of vision to reflect that view. It is possible that people are simply more comfortable with BDSM conceived as sex, or that sex serves as a shorthand for a more complex understanding, but it is nevertheless true that the majority of my participants used words such as sex or sexual sparingly, and as a single strand among many others, in their descriptions of their kink and what it means to them.

Many among my research participants would agree with Newmahr's assertion that in her research and experience BDSM is "neither a precursor to conventional sexual activity nor a replacement for it, but an end unto itself" (2011b p.68). This could be read as a recognition of a Foucauldian "different economy of bodies and pleasures" (Foucault, 1978 p.159) but she also says that, given the paucity of research on SM and particularly on the nature of play, assertions about its essential nature are "premature" (2011b p.67). I agree with Newmahr on both counts, and I do not therefore offer a conclusive answer to the question which heads this section: is it sex?

BDSM is arousing, exciting, intense, stimulating and intimate – all things which might spill over into conventional sex, in the same way that an intense argument could. But it is neither necessarily sexual nor necessarily asexual. While there are people who hold these absolute views the most common lived reality seems to be that BDSM is an idiosyncratic blurring of whatever players agree sex is at that selected moment, with whatever non-sex is agreed to be. My research involved people who had connected with the community, who considered their kink important and an aspect of their identity. In this context, to claim that BDSM is just about sex seems reductive of the experiences people chose to share with me. Similarly, having chosen to include the reflections of the individual as to the significance and/or meaning of their own experience in my analysis, I cannot entirely reject the possibility of kink as sex. I do not therefore seek to commit to an absolute theoretical position on the nature of either kink or sex. Instead I identify the pleasures of kink as taking many distinct and idiosyncratic forms, which may or may not include sexual pleasure and the expression of sexuality as identity. Because it is my intention to present BDSM as described by my research participants I describe it as inclusive of sexual activity when they have included it and I strive to avoid any assumption of that element where they have not done so. I do not regard the question of sex/non-sex as an absolute binary, requiring resolution on one side or the other, any more than I regard

spirituality/religion as two separate and distinct things. I am interested in the ways people use these terms – which is idiosyncratic and fluid – and in an analytic approach which allows for such fluidity to be recognised.

Personal Labels

You go down the high street, you see the signs and it says chemist, and it says butcher and it says bakery. And you know that there is meat in one, and bread in another and there's drugs in the other. But when you go in you find out that one is a Boots, and it doesn't really have much medicine but gift sets. The butcher is Halal so it doesn't have any pork and the bakery only sells bread but no cakes.

– Aey

You know trying to put across what my world is on the website has been the most difficult thing in the world. Because it's just how can you get emotions, feeling, sensations in when the words are so limited and the English language is limited.

– Cee

In addition to deciding how to describe their activities people in the Scene often make a choice of a term to indicate their preferred role in play or relationships. They are encouraged to do this by the structures of most online communities, and it is also useful when seeking potential play partners. Where an individual has a preference for any particular term that is the one I have used in reference to them, but it is also necessary to have a means of referring to aspects of BDSM play and lifestyle in more general terms.

The most common terms in popular discourse seem to be Dom/Domme or Dominant, to describe the person who appears to be in charge during play – the one who is not tied up or being hit with things – and sub or submissive, to describe the person serving

the Dominant. Switch is used to describe people who are happy to take either role.

However, all these terms carry an implication of power exchange, as well as associations with particular forms of relationship which may not apply. By way of illustrating the complexity of the issue I note that Fetlife.com, which describes itself as the largest social network for kinksters, offers a list of more than 60 choices. That includes these three, along with alternatives like Master, slave and kajira (a specific understanding of slave drawn from a particular set of novels), vanilla and undecided.

The screenshot shows the 'Edit your profile' page on FetLife. The 'FetFormation' section is active, displaying fields for Gender (Female), Sexual Orientation (Bisexual), Role (submissive), and How Active Are You (How Active Are You:). A dropdown menu is open, listing 60 roles in three columns:

Dominant	Slut	Primal Prey
Domme	Doll	Bull
Switch	sissy	Cuckold
submissive	Rigger	Cuckquean
Master	Rope Top	Ageplayer
Mistress	Rope Bottom	Daddy
slave	Rope Bunny	Mommy
kajira	Spanko	Big
kajirus	Spanker	Middle
Top	Spankee	little
Bottom	Furry	brat
Sadist	Leather Man	Babygirl
Masochist	Leather Woman	Babyboy
Kinkster	Leather Daddy	Pet
Fetishist	Leather Top	Kitten
Swinger	Leather bottom	Pup
Hedonist	Leather boy	Pony
Exhibitionist	Leather girl	Evolving
Voyeur	Leather Boi	Exploring
Sensualist	Bootblack	Vanilla
Princess	Primal	Undecided
	Primal Predator	*Not Applicable

Below the dropdown, the 'Looking For' section lists various relationship types with checkboxes:

- ☐ A Lifetime Relationship (LTR)
- ☐ A Relationship
- ☐ A Mentor/Teacher
- ☐ Someone To Play With
- ☐ A Princess By Day, Slut By Night
- ☒ Friendship
- ☐ A Master
- ☐ A Mistress
- ☐ A sub
- ☐ A slave
- ☐ Events

3: Fetlife profile page, with list of roles

While most of my participants offered Dom/Domme, sub or switch as their initial response to questions in this area, almost all of them then added qualifications and explanations to their choice: for example Ian specified that he would describe himself as a dom but only if it was given a lower-case 'd', as he felt this communicated something about the nature of his relationships with play partners; Rita described herself as a switch, although all her play experience was in the sub role, because she felt she was only

genuinely submissive to her primary partner; Esteban described himself as a switch on the basis that he needed a label in order to engage with the community and he would be happy to take either role in bondage play, however he was clear that play involving power exchange was of no interest to him. Some of my participants chose terms which avoided any reference to a power relationship: Demon chose “sadist” because he was more interested in playing with pain than with power; Madeleine used “sadoomasochist” as the best fit for her preferred activities although she disliked labels of all kinds; Griff used “primal” as a way of describing his whole person, including his kink, rather than separating kink activity off from the rest of himself; Cee chose “Fetish Practitioner” to describe herself and her play relationships in both a personal and a professional capacity, observing that she disliked most of the standard Scene terminology because of the stereotypes it carries.

Given this complexity I have chosen to refer to specific participants in my research using the terms they use for themselves. When I need to refer more generally to roles within play I have chosen to use “top” as a description for those roles which involve the giving of sensation, pain etc., the wielding of any tools being used and the general direction of the scene and “bottom” for the recipient. These are common terms within the scene, and usually seen as referring more to the mechanics of a scene than to the dynamics of relationship. When discussing relationship, most of my participants chose D/s (Dominant/submissive) to characterise themselves and I have also elected to use this abbreviation and related terms when speaking generally about BDSM relationships.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have set out the basic terminology associated with BDSM and the BDSM Scene, and outlined what is meant by these broad terms in the context of my research conversations and subsequent analysis. In doing so I have laid the foundation for exploring the development of gestalt kink by placing the kink practices of my research

participants in their broader subcultural context and identifying the contribution of kink to identity construction. The following chapter sites my research within academic literature, both that explicitly related to kink behaviour and broader ranging literature relating to concepts within religious studies.

3 – Siting My Research: Literature

A legion of individuals and institutions claim authority, in most cases exclusive authority, in matters spiritual. Religion teaches us to defer to the wisdom of a higher authority – Jehovah, the priest, the guru, the ten commandments, the twelve steps. Academia teaches footnotes: What we say must always be based on somebody else's authority... We decided to write this... on our own authority. We decided to report to you our experiences on a journey we made while we wrote it... All of this... comes directly from our own experience: What we felt and saw and heard and tasted and struggled to find words for. We have chosen ourselves as the authors of our experience.

– (Easton and Hardy, 2004 p.7)

Situated in the interdisciplinary field of religious studies, this work is an examination of the practice of BDSM in relation to concepts of lived and living religion, understood as active processes of personal religioning. At the heart of the work are descriptive and reflective accounts of BDSM experiences collected from active practitioners, who consider their practice important in their lives. Informed throughout by an interest in the complex connections between the body, sensuality, identity and technologies of mediation (such as sensory deprivation or pain) my analysis is organised around themes of embodied experience, ritual, and edgework in relation to processes of religioning. I am aware that, in framing BDSM practices within the concept of religion, I am utilising terminology that many among my research participants dislike. Since their understandings of what it is they do are a part of this work, recognising this dislike is important. My research conversations indicate most people with whom I spoke see religion as a clear category, with inclusion in it being determined by association with named

institution, a personal acceptance of doctrine and, usually, a belief in deity. Such a view was the most common basis for a total rejection of the term, and it was often coupled with the idea of personal authority as an essential element of spirituality. In this siting of my research within existing academic literature, I will move away from this absolute and artificial distinction between religion and spirituality, and illustrate instead a broader concept of religion as an appropriate domain in which to explore gestalt kink.

People are animate beings caught up in the dynamics of their immediate surroundings, drawing from and conditioned by ecology, biology, psychology, culture, past happenings, possible futures and many forms and qualities of relationship (LaMothe, 2015, Sheets-Johnstone, 2009a, Vásquez, 2011). Religious studies has often failed to recognise these multiple connections, instead presenting religion as something either wholly interior or wholly transcendent, and this view profoundly limits understanding of change, movement and hybridity. By contrast, looking at how people in all their complexity, actually engage with the religious, it is possible to recognise “phenomena that are salient in everyday life... that exercise palpable power on and through the lives of practitioners” (Vásquez, 2011 p.322). The study of individual practice is important in this, since, as Orsi puts it, “there is no religion that people have not taken up into their hands” (2003 p.172). In the Western world, in the early years of the twenty-first century, the context within which people take religion into their hands is one of hypermodernity: a time of hyper-individualism and constant change, “galloping commercialisation... [and] technical and scientific developments being unleashed with effects that are heavy with threats as well as promises” (Lipovetsky and Charles, 2005 p.31), a vast, but purposeless, enthusiasm for change and novelty with a strong emphasis on autonomy and personal choice.

Instead of seeking to identify an essential element shared by all religions, I have chosen to follow McGuire's (2008b) suggestion that to understand religion we should avoid

creating images of what we think it is, or ought to be. Considering what people actually do, and how they understand it, opens the study of religion beyond the conceptual bundles of belief, practice, text, doctrine etc. endorsed by named institutions. It also enables movement away from the idea that people have 'a religion' towards a more abstract concept of 'the religious' as an element shaped to and by individual lives – a process of religioning. My interest is in things which begin, perhaps, as simple enjoyment or relaxation, but which over time become woven into individual lives in ways which add 'something else' – whether this is acquired through created experiences, in how the activity is valued, or its place in life perceived. BDSM involves individuals who are embedded in nature and in culture; that culture contributes, not only to the weighting of the term religion noted above, but to understandings of self, identity, bodies and relationships. It is in the contribution of BDSM to experiencing these things differently and to the sense of place within a complex reality that I locate my claims to BDSM as gestalt, and so as religion.

BDSM

Academic discourse shows a growing recognition that the study of BDSM has more to offer than the hitherto dominant discourse of psychopathology. Within the realm of psychology BDSM, seen as other than psychopathological, has given rise to narratives presenting the practice as therapeutic or potentially healing (Henkin, 2013, Lindemann, 2011), as an escape from the burden of selfhood (Baumeister, 1988) and as creative experiments to address existential anxieties (Langdridge, 2005). Other academic disciplines have examined the social construction of BDSM (Beckmann, 2009), the nature and structure of specific BDSM communities (Newmahr, 2011b), the relationships of professional Dominants with their clients in a world of normalised hierarchical relationships (Lindemann, 2012), representations of BDSM in popular culture (Scott, 2015),

BDSM as edgework (Newmahr, 2011a) and the circuits of connection between BDSM practices and racial, gendered or sexual norms (Weiss, 2011).

These varied foci do often recognise that BDSM “holds a kind of seriousness and significance beyond that of a frivolous leisure activity or bounded occupational exchange” (Lindemann, 2012 p.135). There is also recognition that individuals might place their practice “within a spiritual or mystical framework” (Taylor and Ussher, 2001 p.305). These terms are often used uncritically but, where deeper consideration is given, such a framework is generally associated with the experience of altered states of consciousness (Beckmann, 2009, Easton and Hardy, 2004, Taylor and Ussher, 2001). The possibilities of profound experience created through BDSM are commonly referenced in literature arising from within the community, and are recognised within academic discourse. Such experience may take the form of transcendence (Beckmann, 2013, Kraemer, 2014), loss of self (Kaldera, 2006, MacKendrick, 1999), or a sense of more holistic, fully integrated self (Easton and Hardy, 2004, Pita, 2004). Intense experiences are thus a readily available source of spiritual meaning or fulfilment for BDSM practitioners, even for individuals with no particular religious affiliation. However, neither the lived experiences themselves nor the ways they are understood and used by practitioners have yet been a discrete subject of religious studies (Beckmann, 2013).

In order to address this gap, my research focuses on the lived experiences of individuals engaging in the physical practice of BDSM, without restricting this to experiences which have been explicitly categorised as spiritual by the players themselves. From this broad starting point it is possible to consider the different ways in which experiences are used and understood, understandings which constitute the potential of BDSM to be “experiences-deemed-religious” (Taves, 2009, p.10).

Religious Experience or Experiences-Deemed-Religious

The body of work found under the heading 'religious experience' is large, and there is often little attempt to distinguish different forms a religious experience might take (Sharf, 1998). The main interest seems to be with a special kind of awareness – “white hot” (Taylor, 2003 p.29) experiences of special or altered consciousness, which are often presented as being fundamentally ineffable. This particular form of experience is generally considered as completely separate from matters pertaining to the body of the experiencer or their inherent bodily relationality. This limited perspective underpins existing research on the potential of BDSM as a spiritual practice, and the kinds of experience which have been used within the community as a basis for presenting BDSM as a spiritual practice (Easton and Hardy, 2004, Harrington, 2009). The only detailed study exploring spiritual BDSM has drawn heavily on literature around Christian mysticism in order to show how BDSM satisfies “the longing for religious and spiritual experiences” (Beckmann, 2009 p.193). From this literature, Beckmann identifies a list of “common elements of ‘transcendental experiences’” (2009 p.203), which provide the basis of a questionnaire asking individuals whether they had experienced each element through their BDSM practice. This approach is problematic. Attempts to universalise religious experiences by identifying core elements common to all of them, regardless of context or culture, are distorting and dismissive of deeply felt religious experiences which do not include these elements. It also, arguably, seeks to present these “inner subjective states” (Vásquez, 2011 p.90) as wholly personal and thus beyond critique or challenge (Sharf, 1998, Williams, 2012).

The concern here is that 'ineffable' is employed to protect the category from critique by placing it beyond discussion (Proudfoot, 1985). This criticism can be extended – Carrette suggests that a “disciplinary amnesia” (2007 p.73) is at work across the

psychology of religion, regarding the different ways the human sciences have approached, constructed and understood the individual subject in relation to 'the crowd' or wider society. Inter-disciplinary discourses relating to religion are always tangled in institutions (politics, economics etc.) but this fact is masked by a "critical myopia" : a strategy of failing to recognise that scholars are themselves inside the same "rules of engagement" which they seek to examine (2007 pp.13, 14). This creates the impression that some absolute truth can exist beyond the institutions and discourses which create it, and makes science into "a fetish, an object human beings make only to forget their role" (Haraway, 1991 p.8). In short, because the discourse of psychology has institutional support, it becomes used as a placeholder of truth, displacing that of religious experience. Without a lens of critique that exposes the values behind the ways knowledge is divided and thinking constructed scholars can be drawn into the error of thinking that it is only the self which makes experience, rather than the self as embedded in social context, language and institutions.

This view of religious experience is rooted in James' famous definition of religion as "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine" (James, 1985 p.31). This summary, described by James himself as arbitrary, has been regarded by many as offering an answer to the perplexing question of what the essence of all religion might be. James is often associated with the view that religion (and therefore religious experience) is *sui generis*; he does not explicitly make this claim himself (Taves, 2009), but did regard the personal experience of particular individuals as the wellspring for the edifice of organised religion. To take individual, felt experience as the most important factor in understanding religion gives a view of it that is very much in accord with the importance given to choice and autonomy in the contemporary world. That is, 'serious' religion is regarded as personal commitment rather than external conformity (Taylor, 2003).

Beckmann's (2009) work can be located at this essentialist end of a spectrum of views on religious experience. The opposite end is provided by constructivist views which argue that religious experiences are shaped by pre-existing conditions. Within this view, the distinguishing mark of a religious experience is that the subject of it believes it to have been one. It is therefore important to understand what it is, in or about the subject, which gives rise to this belief or to their utilisation of the concept. Since people rarely describe experiences in terms of a religion they are unfamiliar with, it seems likely to be this knowledge, and the language in which it is contained, that shape the experience (Proudfoot, 1985). It is interesting to note that individuals who have profound BDSM experiences *without* placing them in a pre-existing religious framework often borrow from religious language in their descriptions of that experience. Epistemological disputes notwithstanding, it is also important to be aware that, for a person who has had a religious experience, the immediacy and (apparently) unmediated nature of the event is often important to their understanding of it as religious (Taves, 2009).

For some scholars, the presence of this understanding is all that can meaningfully be discussed with regard to religious experiences. Sharf (1998) argues that if religious experiences are as they have generally been described to be – that is, wholly private and subjective – then they can exist only in the individual consciousness. He accepts that this is existence, of a sort, but questions whether such a thing is available for study, since any “epistemological certainty experience may offer is gained only at the expense of any possible discursive meaning or signification” (Sharf, 1998 p.116). Extending this argument to its fullest means that “terms that supposedly refer to psychological episodes cannot actually do so... [rendering] the term ‘experience’... not sufficiently meaningful to serve as a useful concept” (Bush, 2012 p.204). The focus of the study of experience, as Sharf conceives it, can thus only be on the “historical, social and linguistic processes that give

rise to the narrative representation” (Sharf, 1998 p.113), and the most it is possible to say about the experience itself is that it appeared to be real to the person who experienced it.

In his critique of Sharf in particular, and approaches to religious experience in general, Bush (2012) suggests that wholly separating questions of cause from questions of nature cannot help but create the kind of radically subjective concept Sharf rejects. However, such a distinction is difficult to sustain if the physical aspects of religious practice are taken into account. A naturalist perspective would identify clear physiological cause for altered consciousness achieved through BDSM – in the form of the chemical responses of the body to the kink activity, and the internal states created by these. In this sense the experience is a veridical event, but other frameworks are possible, applied either in tension with naturalistic explanation or as a rejection of it. Taves suggests that such a framework may be secular, naturalistic, tradition based or “generically mystical” (2009 p.118). None of these changes the experience itself, but the linguistic framework chosen will have an effect on the memory of the experience, the meaning it is ascribed, and the uses to which it is put.

Blum seeks to challenge the “dominant epistemological perspective” (2012 p.202) of experience as wholly defined and bounded by cognitive function and expectation. He argues that understanding experience as created from received sensory input, together with the mental filtering of this input, has led to a form of linguistic empiricism, and the corresponding view that reality can only be encountered with the mediation of language. Blum calls this a “double-reduction” (2012 p.204), in which experience is characterised as an essentially cognitive process, and concepts are defined and bounded by language – a position which renders an experience that is beyond articulation a logical impossibility. This being so, to describe something as ineffable can only be an attempt to prevent its

discussion. Rather than implying an experience which “surpassed the limits of language”, it proclaims that an experience “must not be described” (Blum, 2012 p.205).

Blum correctly argues that this ascription of a protective function to the term ineffability makes no sense. The term has been used across many and diverse contexts, and in times and places with no need for such apologetic protection. It is more reasonable to accept that the term functions as a signal of experiential aspects that are not linguistic in nature. This possibility is evident in situations where people report an awareness of the gap between the experience they had and their ability to describe it in a way that seems adequate and meaningful. Recognising this does not make assumptions about the existence of the supernatural; it does not make “ontological claims about the nature of existence or the metaphysical status of the self” (Blum, 2012 p.217) and it does not reject or avoid naturalistic explanations for qualitatively ineffable experiences. Instead, it allows that experience consists of both linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions. My research participants rarely used the precise term ‘ineffable’, but used other linguistic signals that function in this same way (Bauer, 2014).

Blum's argument arises from an application of James' radical empiricism: “to be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, not exclude from them any element that is directly experienced” (2003 p.22). This approach requires accounting “not only for the conceptual or discursive dimensions of experience, but also the non-rational and vaguer aspects of it” (Blum, 2012 p.209). These vaguer dimensions include emotion, physical sensations, intuition etc. which, while not easily described, have a profound impact. Through radical empiricism, language and thought come to be regarded as subsets of experience rather than the “boundaries within which experience must obtain” (Blum, 2012 p.210). This allows the recognition that people in different contexts may use the same descriptor, not because their experiences

are actually identical, but because (however radically different in form and content) they share the quality of being non-linguistic in character. To have a mystical experience is not to vacate the world entirely, or even to obtain temporary sight of some other realm. Such binary distinctions are not necessary if one accepts that an ineffable experience is simply “a distinctly different (and unspeakable)” (Blum, 2012 p.216) means of experiencing the world.

The term ‘religious experience’ creates a sense of ambiguity precisely because, when used without the definite article, it implies a general and abstract concept (Taves, 2009). Even if the idea of a discrete religious experience is subsequently introduced, the ambiguity has been established along with the idea that this is a category. A category, by definition, assumes elements in common among all things placed within it. To counter this, Taves proposes the term “experiences deemed religious” which, although admittedly clumsier, intrinsically recognises that there is more than one possible form for experiences. Many among my research participants might prefer to designate their experiences as profound or special, but this does not exclude them from the proposed category if it is accepted as that any profound experience can be understood as-if it were religious – as being like, similar to, or related to religious experience (Coggins, 2015). Individual accounts of experiences can thus be considered from differing perspectives, and the meaning or valuation given to them by both the experiencer and by others can be taken into account. The implication of religion and religious things being *sui generis* is also removed since, if it is ‘deemed’ religious, it is clearly not presumed to have intrinsic religiosity. This offers an ascriptive model for religion, in which things become sacred by being given significance by individuals. These newly sacred things can remain simple ascriptions, constructed through personal experience and remaining personal, or they can become composite ascriptions, whereby a path is created to enable the re-creation in the present of something that was previously deemed to be special. This kind of flexible approach, with its emphasis on the

individuals concerned, is in accord with the concepts of religioning as a living active process that inform my research into experiences.

Lived Religion

Orsi describes “socially acceptable” religion as “private and interior... intellectually consistent, and reasonable... a matter of decision, choice and personal commitment” (1997 p.6). This is a view of religion that supports the idea of distinct binaries such as sacred/profane or matter/spirit, and which implies that anything blurring such categories cannot be religion. But in Orsi's view there is no such neat binary separation between the things people do in their everyday lives and the things they do in designated ‘religious’ spaces. Religion cannot be separated from the material situation in which it arises, and/or to which it responds; this means that religion can be found everywhere and anywhere in “workplaces, homes and streets – as well as churches, temples, shrines... [these] are the places where humans make something of the worlds they have found themselves thrown into” (Orsi, 1997 p.7). Through the actions occurring in these places, meanings are made and known. This lived religion is also intimately concerned with relationship. Relationships with religious institutions, authorities and fellow-practitioners are just a few strands of the inter-personal web that feeds into the making and remaking of worlds. Orsi argues that religion is made through the use of ideas which are “of the moment, invented, taken, borrowed and improvised at the intersections of life” (1997 p.8). They are found where and when people need them, and reshaped to fit those needs, regardless of the place ascribed to religious authority. This contrasts strongly with perspectives that cast ‘proper’ religion as performances within institutions and/or with some kind of official sanction. The result of this distinction is that individualised practice becomes labelled somewhat derogatorily as folk or unofficial religion, with the corresponding implication that “religion somewhere exists as a pure element which is in some way transformed, even

contaminated, by its exposure to human communities” (Primiano, 1995 p.39). In fact, even within the hierarchical institutions mistakenly identified as religious reality itself, members are still “believing and practising vernacularly” (1996 p.46). Accepted orthodoxy interacts with folk tradition, and creative and personal interpretations are always at play (Bowman, 2004). Religion is thus always vernacular in that it is always lived, encountered, engaged with, and interpreted by human beings.

To grapple with the complexity and dynamism of this kind of “religion-as-practiced” (McGuire, 2008b p.5) requires an approach that considers what it is people actually do, so as to move beyond pre-determined conceptual bundles of belief, practice, text, doctrine, etc. Edgell describes lived religion as “centrally concerned with religious experiences and contested processes of sacralisation” (2012 p.253), indicating that the study of lived religion can extend beyond the context of institutions and communities already recognised and categorised as religious, to look at practices with which individuals engage in “a space of their own devising” (Hall, 1997 p.viii). Lived religion is not necessarily restricted to practices which the individuals concerned explicitly categorise as religious. Taylor's work on “soul-surfers” describes surfers who, having never previously thought of their engagement with the sport as religious, nevertheless “recognise themselves, and their subculture” in his analysis of surfing through “the lenses typically deployed by scholars of religion” (Taylor, 2007 pp.939, 926). McGuire also includes in her work individuals who do not use the label ‘religious’ but who devote “considerable time and attention” to practices enabling them to “share, enact, adapt, create and combine the stories out of which they live”, and through which they create and express meaning and value (2008b pp.47, 99).

‘Spirituality’ is often deployed as an alternative to ‘religion’ for describing personally meaningful practices engaged in outside of a recognised religious institution.

Care must be taken with this distinction, not only because spirituality has no clearer or more universally agreed essential nature than religion does, but also because both terms are employed with moral weighting which it is not the role of the researcher to reify (Ammerman, 2013). The construction of the category of 'religion', by scholars for analytic purposes, happened in a time and place which is not this time and place (Asad, 1993); areas of interest within that category are "bound neither by the demarcations of a given canon nor by the limits of a historic community in constituting the domain of the argument" (Smith, 1987 p.xii).

Approaching religion in this way de-emphasises "cognitive and doctrinal" (Edgell, 2012 p.253) in order to focus on embodied practices and the narratives which make sense of them. Because these are dynamic processes, unpredictable, potentially volatile and always in flux, I prefer the term "religioning", which signals an active, iterative and continual process rather than "a thing, with an essence to be defined and explained" (Nye, 2000 p.476). This concept is Nye's contribution to the category of religion debate, and the question of what it is that is studied within that category. Religioning enables the rejection of assumptions about the sui generis nature of religion as "essential, unique, prior to and ultimately distinct from all other facets of human life and interaction" (McCutcheon, 1997 p.26) without dissolving the study of religion wholly into other disciplines. Borrowing from cultural studies Nye presents religion "not as something that does, but is instead done" (2000, p.456). This re-conceptualisation as verb rather than noun creates a new set of expectations for study of the religious as something people do within complex contexts. The practices of religioning are not completed or perfected, they are living performances individual agents, who are not subsumed by dogmatic traditions but who have "their own particular ways and experiences of making their religiosities manifest" (Nye, 2000 p.467).

The spaces of lived religioning are spaces of “activity, engagement, ambivalence and doubleness” (Orsi, 1997 p.12), formed as people both create and respond to change. Taves and Bender describe this as a study of “things to which people grant special meaning” (Taves and Bender, 2012 p.11) and the practices used to create it – a view similar to that Taves (2009) proposes in relation to deeming experiences religious. This is not ‘practice’ conceived as a complete or perfected performance of prescribed actions, but “*practicing* and the dynamic social processes wherein experience, authority and creativity are reproduced in ritual, actions, strategies and habits in both embodied and discursive senses” (Taves and Bender, 2012 p.13). Similarly, Orsi understands religion as “the practice of making the invisible visible, of concretising the order of the universe, the nature of human life... and the various dimensions and possibilities of human interiority itself... in order to render them visible and tangible” (Orsi, 2005 p.73-74).

A concept of religioning results in an understanding which has “uncertain boundaries” (Taves and Bender, 2012 p.13). It also avoids the creation of an artificial certainty that would exclude the reality of many people's lives. Religion, at the level of the individual, is not a neat unit that can be isolated from other human concerns. Logical coherence, consistency and/or conformity to “an entire simple package of beliefs and practices” (McGuire, 2008b p.12) are not particularly important from an individual perspective, which encounters religion as constantly in flux. Such a “multi-faceted, often messy or even contradictory amalgam of beliefs and practices” (McGuire, 2008b p.208) has a practical coherence, in that it makes sense within an individual life. This lived religion is concerned with active projects, through which people practically address their deepest concerns. It is here that I locate the potential of BDSM as religious practice, with these contributions to living feeding the emergent sense of BDSM as a gestalt, regardless of where individual practitioners locate themselves in regard to terms such as ‘religious’, ‘spiritual’ or ‘secular’.

Religious or Spiritual?

Given the emphasis I have placed on the personal and the fluid, together with the general preference among my research participants for the term spiritual, it seems necessary to give some consideration to the perceived religious/spiritual binary.

The phrase 'spiritual but not religious' has become commonly used to describe people who fall outside of, or who consciously reject, the religious mainstream. Ammerman correctly argues that using this label in this way imposes an artificial binary, through its implication that people can be either spiritual or religious but not both. This is a moral categorisation: for those inside a faith tradition 'spiritual' becomes a means of distinguishing "godly people and ungodly ones" (2013 p.275), while for those outside organised religion it signifies freedom from oppressive authority. Since, to an outside observer, "the religion being rejected turns out to be quite unlike the religion being practiced and described by those affiliated with religious institutions...[and] the spirituality being endorsed as an alternative is at least as widely practiced by those same religious people as it is by people drawing a moral boundary against them" (2013 p.275) this usage is not helpful in defining the terms, although it is a necessary element of the context in which the terms are used. The fact that participants in a study might make such separations can be recognised and understood without seeking to reify that distinction.

Streib and Hood's consideration of proposed definitions for 'spirituality', 'religion' and 'the sacred' concludes that these concepts are so closely related that it is almost nonsensical to regard them as separate areas for study. They suggest that religion is sufficient as an etic term, but spirituality retains importance as an emic term, referring to a person's "privatised individualised and experience-oriented religiosity" (2011 p.442). Similarly, Woodhead (2011) suggests that, rather than beginning any and every study with a definition, the researcher should instead be critically aware of the concept(s) of religion

in play and its justifiability in that context. It is therefore important to know whether the individual subject refers to their practice as spirituality, religion, or simply “what it is that we do” (Newmahr, 2011b p.166) and to understand what is meant by those terms. But it is also important to recognise that experiences described in the same terms might be categorised in different ways by the people doing the describing.

Ritual

It has been noted that the concept of practice within processes of religioning extends beyond ideas of prescribed and perfected performance. However, introducing the concept of ritual requires more than this simple assertion. Ritual is often perceived as fixed and unchangeable, and therefore it may be dismissed as empty or meaningless if one lacks the appropriate internal beliefs to give that fixed performance meaning. It may also be viewed with suspicion, or dismissed as irrelevant, in a hypermodern world which values the rational, the new and the sophisticated so highly (Bouissac, 2014, McWhorter, 2004, Seligman et al., 2008). A hypermodern context conceptually positions ritual with the irrational or the primitive allowing it to be, at best, a psychological compensation for those who cannot cope with harsh realities of contemporary life and, at worst, an actively destructive and inhibiting force (McWhorter, 2004).

There are two important misconceptions in this casual view of ritual. Firstly, that ritual is purely an external marker of internal processes and, secondly, that ritual consists of perfected and repetitive action. People can engage in ritual activity without being concerned with meaning or symbolism, just as religion can be found outside religious institutions. Bouissac's (2014) consideration of circus performance as ritual begins with the assumption that, as a concept, ritual originates in the sphere of religion and thus engaging in ritual implies seeking interaction with supernatural entities. He then goes on to observe that the post-Enlightenment reluctance to commit to the radical suspension of disbelief

required by this understanding of the concept has not led to the removal of ritual from society. This persistence of ritual practice suggests there is more to the concept, and Bouissac suggests that processes of ritualising serve a human need to transcend individual circumstances and also rationality in order to break away from prescribed social behaviours. Ritual therefore “exceeds” any rationalisation it may be given, including any symbolic value. This idea of exceeding the rational is in accord with Grimes view that ordinary actions “when extraordinarily practiced, break open, transforming human conventions and revealing what is most deeply desirable, most cosmically orienting, and most fully human” (2002 p.346). Thus there is no hard line between ritual and non-ritual, religious and non-religious; any activity that can be a part of ritual can also be engaged in outside of ritual spaces (Seligman et al., 2008). Rather there are points at which things spill over the edges of the conceptual containers they have been placed in, or exceed the rational explanations attached to them. This is when activities begin to be felt as *gestalts*.

If activities become ritual not because of anything inherent in the actions themselves but because of the way the actions are framed, named and oriented then these actions need have “no other purpose than themselves” (Bouissac, 2014 p.27). Actions which take place within ritual can always also be performed in non-ritualised contexts because, among the other things it does, ritual continually renegotiates boundaries, building and rebuilding the everyday world into an “as if, or ‘could be’ universe” (Seligman et al., 2008 p.7). The dual role of boundaries in both uniting and separating is emphasised in and strengthened through ritual, and the ambiguities and contradictions of the living world are cast into new light within ritual spaces. For Ezzy this is an element of what makes rituals a key aspect of “living a life with soul” (2014 p.20), that is living life in ways that enable the experience of it as meaningful and worthwhile. Ezzy describes ritual practices as active engagements with “symbolic resources to provide an etiquette for relationships and an emotional and cognitive sense of self-worth and

purpose” (2014, p.22). The process of ritualising is thus a means by which actions, events or processes are marked out and given special values, which are not simply symbolic meanings in the representational sense (Stewart and Strathern, 2014).

Viewing ritual as practice rather than as a notional category reveals rituals to be dynamic processes of activity and enactment (Grimes, 2002, Grimes, 2013, Houseman, 2008, Kapferer, 2005, Schechner, 1993, Seligman et al., 2008), rather than perfected and repetitive. Repetition is the primary characteristic of ritual as the term is used within fields such as medicine, where it describes the repetitive/obsessive behaviours associated with dysfunction (Favazza, 1996) and biology, where it describes animal courtship behaviours (Bouissac, 2014). The implication of such usage is that ritual action is mechanistic and prescribed, with no room for improvisation, accident or fluidity. However, ritual is also a quality of action, and any action is potentially different every time for the person who performs it. The movements we make are also making us, and every movement is “enabled and supported by the movements of others moving around us, within us, passing through us and pre-existing us” (LaMothe, 2015 p.31). As a pattern of action and movement, ritual has the capacity to work with this matrix, to encounter and absorb change and variation even if it does not deliberately seek them. Ritual is never just action A, followed by action B, all the way through to action Z. It is rather actions built around certain recognisable elements. For example, a wedding ceremony requires the people who wish to solemnise their relationship, and a way in which that process can be witnessed and made tangible. There are many different forms this might take – repeating vows and exchanging rings, a physical joining of hands or clothing, exchanging tokens or the splitting of a single token – but these apparent differences rest on a few foundational elements which make the whole recognisably a wedding. It is not the sequence of actions but the overall pattern, the composition of the whole from different elements which gives rise to the gestalt of the ritual.

Ritual enables the conceptual framing of such negotiations and constructions as one means by which people participate in the “ongoing experiment of reality” (Harvey, 2013 p.82). As the movements which constitute the actions of ritual are made new spaces are shaped (LaMothe, 2015). Whether these are described as as-if worlds (Seligman et al., 2008), or virtualities of “self-contained imaginal space” (Kapferer, 2005 p.47), they are real other-where in which particular qualities of experience can be explored. These spaces can be created via deliberate and conscious processes of ritualising, but they might also come into existence via what Grimes describes as tacit ritualisation: an “activity that is not culturally defined as ritual but that someone could interpret as if it were” (2002 p.28). Grimes contrasts tacit ritualisation with the fully formed “rites” which occur when “a group enhances or emphasises the qualities to the point at which a definitional threshold is crossed” (2002 p.28). BDSM can be enacted as a rite in this sense, but even where it is not so labelled it remains process-oriented, challenging and subversive (Kraemer, 2014). By considering the processes of play as ritual negotiations it is possible to understand the activities of BDSM as the creative constructions of agents for whom “the medium is very much the message” (Seligman et al., 2008 p.113).

These experiments in reality require fluidity and creativity; they require the capacity to empathise so that experiences which would otherwise be an individual “is” can be shared “in the potential space of what could be” (Seligman et al., 2008 p.23). To create such a shared as-if world the ritual actions which created it must fully engage the lived reality of those who participate. Rites which do not effectively perform such experimentation are “skin-deep” as opposed to the inscription “in the heart, in the memory, in the mind, in texts, in photographs, in descriptions, in social values and in the marrow, the source of our lifeblood” of fully engaged ritual (Grimes, 2002 pp.5, 7). For the many people who dislike the concept of organised religion and reject any external authority figure able to pronounce on personal spiritual development, the most effective

rituals seem likely to be those un-named emergent experiences, which occur outside the structures of traditional organised religion.

Liminality is a concept often associated with ritual. It was originally used by Van Gennep (1961) to describe the stage within a rite of passage when the individual is neither in the state in which they entered the ritual space, or the new state which the ritual will ultimately create. The concept has since been broadened, not only to apply to forms of ritual practice other than life-cycle ritual (Turner, 2008) but to any state or situation “during which the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction” (Thomassen, 2014 p.1). It has therefore become an extremely flexible and arguably overused concept. Simply describing a condition as liminal says only that it is in-between two things. Religioning outside of religious institutions might be described this way, but it adds little to understandings of either the concept or the processes involved. Thomassen points out that liminality “does not and cannot ‘explain’ anything” (2014 p.7), but is a descriptor of the process/stage of change – something that happens, to which human beings respond.

Thinking with the concept of liminality requires a recognition of the “precarious balance” (Thomassen, 2014 p.110) between limit and the limitless around which human life is organised. This recognition is helpful in understanding the power of the liminal spaces created by BDSM, which can be framed as an exploration of boundary and limit in both the very personal and the broader social sense. As with the Faunalia rituals described by Ezzy (2014), kink can be described as an active engagement with things (like sorrow or suffering) that are feared or avoided by the culture in which the practice is situated. Kink engages with these complex, ambiguous or unspoken elements of human experience, enabling engagement with and exploration of: power, and the experience of power, for both the wielder and the recipient of that wielding (Lindemann, 2012, Newmahr, 2010a,

Newmahr, 2011b, Weiss, 2011); existential and/or ontical anxieties (Langdrige, 2005); the potentials and the limits of human existence (Buenting, 2003); with the self which “exists somewhere between the unconscious and full conscious self” (Ezzy p.36); and with matters of concern like taboo, trauma and alterity.

Ritual as practice can be framed in many ways: as a means of “negotiating our very existence in the world” (Seligman et al., 2008 p.8); as a means of finding actions that “are also bridges – reliable doings carrying people across dangerous waters” (Schechner, 1993 p.230); as offering a kind of “spice[ing] up daily existence with flavours so exquisite that we are unable to forget the banquet... revealing what is most deeply desirable, most cosmically orienting, and most fully human” (Grimes, 2002 p.346); as creating a liminal “moment in and out of time” (Turner, 2008 p.96) which enables passage from one status to another; as an enactment of nominally contradictory relationships “sustained by intentionally and emotionally laden events” (Houseman, 2005 p.76); and as “the intentional practice of dynamics of power” (Buenting, 2003 p.44). BDSM can potentially be understood within any of these frames, although only the last has as yet been explored – Buenting claims BDSM not only as an example of a ritual process but as a possible paradigm for the very concept of ritual. But, as already noted, any act can be interpreted in one way by an external observer and yet understood quite differently by the participants themselves (Stewart and Strathern, 2014). To understand ritual in relation to itself, it should be studied in its own right, rather than presumed “to be constituted through representations of the sociocultural surround that give it life” (Handelman, 2005 p.2). Ritualising may be a pervasive human activity (Grimes, 2003), but it is not a discrete realm wholly distinct from all other forms of human action. Rather, it is a modality of human engagement with the world, a creative tool that helps people to cope with the “contradictory demands of existence” (Seligman et al., 2008 p.12).

Bodies

Ritual spaces are shaped by bodily movements, combined in different ways to create an “overall pattern of behaviour” within the space of the ritual (Houseman 2008 p.414). BDSM has also been considered as a tool for conducting explorations of the lived body (Beckmann, 2001) and the human body is therefore a matter requiring critical consideration.

Human beings are bodies (LaMothe, 2015, Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b). It is not possible for a person to step outside their flesh (Furey, 2012, Kraemer, 2014, McGuire, 1990) or to have an experience to which physiology does not contribute. Even those experiences which are thought of as spiritual “remain tethered to our bodies” (Kraemer, 2014 p.165) – an out-of-body experience is still likely to be described in sensory terms such as vision or observer location. The sense of self is linked to the body. Emotions have somatic impact. Physical and mental well-being are intimately connected. Memory can be physically encoded, and recalling it has corporeal effects. Human cognitive processes can control and influence bodies in ways often presumed unavailable to other creatures – instincts can be overridden, emotions recognised and choices made about whether to act upon them. But this is not a unilateral process – these choices, and any actions which result from them, in turn affect our experience and understanding of our bodies (Butler, 2011). Bodies are also inherently relational; the importance of physical touch for proper development and psychological well-being is well understood (Kraemer, 2014), but all senses contribute to knowledge and create relationship, with both human and non-human others. Through fully-bodied, multi-sensory experiences multiple connections with the world are forged and the self “receives the nourishment of otherness” (Abram, 1997 p.ix).

The dualistic view of consciousness sitting within the shell of the body remains pervasive (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b). Even when attempts are made to avoid it, there is

often a lingering idea that the physical senses create an experience which is then somehow passed to the brain for analysis, instead of attempting to recognise the intersensorial and “multi-directional interaction of the senses and of sensory ideologies” (Howes, 2005 p.9). To understand people as entities that are experientially anchored to and engaged with the world in meaningful ways (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009a) requires rejecting the idea of ‘consciousness’ as an entity itself, instead insisting that the term refers to a function (James, 2003). From this perspective ‘thoughts’ and ‘things’ appear different, because of the ways in which different aspects of experience are grouped together. The same single element could feature in one such grouping as a thought, and in another as a thing, but it remains numerically one unit: “the instant field of the present” (James, 2003 p.12). Rabelo et al. similarly suggest that sensory encounter be thought of as “already enmeshed and articulated in a total experience – as praxis that is both an exploration of place and a response to the many summons of place” (2009 p.3).

The English language contributes to confusion about bodies, because it is possible to speak of the body both as something that you are (subject), and as something that you have (object). Suchet poses the question of whether the body in the 21st century is subject, object or a process/performance that combines the two. She concludes it is the latter – “an ever emerging unfinished project whose meaning is acquired through symbolic gestures” (2009 p.114). The basic physicality of the body is not in doubt, but it is the subject of many different and competing domains of discourse – biological, medical, chemical, health and illness, life and death. Each of these domains is “constituted through the boundary lines that distinguish them and, hence, by what they exclude” (Butler, 2011 p.36), creating hierarchies, overlaps and challenges to those boundaries. The materialities to which such discourses refer are thus both contested and persistent, and so the experience and understanding an individual has of their physical body will be affected by the discourses utilised in creating that understanding. This raises many of the questions that currently

occupy the social sciences in relation to the body, including those concerning “non-mainstream body practices” in an “obsessively body oriented” culture (Suchet, 2009 p.115). Although her main interest is body modification, Suchet refers explicitly to BDSM as one such non-mainstream body practice, suggesting that it is deliberately intended to “counter the heterodoxy of mainstream culture” (2009 p.115). This is in keeping with her claim that the body is both a site for exploring subjectivity and for creating identity, and that it can be used to create a sense of being both more alive and more powerful.

Using the body to reinforce choices that reflect cultural prejudices and classifications means anything remarkable about or within a body “is subsumed into a univocal series made from binary choices”(MacCormack, 2006 p.63); thus a woman is understood as not being a man, “racial others” (2006 p.63) as not being white, deviant as not normal. This amounts to classifying bodies as abnormal in relation a proposed standard, so that the power of the norms which they apparently defy is actually strengthened. Butler (2011) agrees that to label something creates a boundary; once such a boundary is in place examples of behaviour are read in relation to the particular set of values which created it, rendering them either recognisable (inside) or other (outside). This connects those within the created category, but it does so through “the exclusion of a field of disruptive possibilities” (Butler, 2011 p.10). In the context of human identity, such boundaries relate to what is and is not considered human, so to be outside is to become “the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable” (2011 p.xvii). Individuals who choose to transgress norms do so through a dynamic and reiterative process of actions and choices that Butler describes as “performativity”; it is not simply that they made one choice which has since defined their identity, they made and continue to make many choices in response to the world and the society in which they live. Many such boundary-creating norms exist in relation to sexual behaviours, and since BDSM has primarily been categorised as sexual,

it is perhaps this which makes BDSM appear so transgressive and helps to construct the discourse of BDSM as pathology (Foucault, 1978).

Bodies in Hypermodernity

Varga speaks for many in describing the body as “the intersection of nature and culture, of the individual and society, of space and time, of corporeality and spirituality (mind)” (2005 p.210), and characterising it not only as the site for the project of constructing individuality, but also as the subject of social control and manipulation – a site of both power and resistance. The specific culture in which Varga is interested is the hypermodernity manifest in the Western developed world. A hypermodern culture has continued the trends of modernity to what would once have been considered extremes: Foucault's (1977) concept of ‘discipline’ or disciplinary society was sited within specific institutions – prisons, hospitals and schools – created for the purpose of controlling behaviour, but much of the world can now function as a panopticon without walls, incorporating both overt methods of surveillance (such as the increasing prevalence of cameras) and the more subtle exercise of power through norms and social expectations. This excess of control and observation is just one of the excesses which characterises a hypermodern culture.

The hypermodern world is a world of technology, playing “the role once held by philosophy or politics” (Charles, 2009 p.392) in that it gives the foundation on which the burning issues of the day are debated. The increasing involvement of science in everyday life is evident in the widespread use of microelectronics, virtual reality and genetic, reproductive, medical and cosmetic technologies that manipulate and change the human body. Virtual reality includes the idea of virtual body, not subject to time, birth or death, having neither emotions nor physical limits. These technologies and the worlds made by them objectivise and externalise the physical human body, divorcing it from its “natural,

spatial relations and... temporal rhythm”(Varga, 2005). Wegierski suggests that the constant tension between the “primeval unconscious”, virtually unchanged from the first homo sapiens, and the “completely manipulated” (1995 p.22) world humanity has built for itself is a source of deep and widespread unhappiness. This unhappiness exists even within those who appear to accept contemporary norms, and it grows deeper as people try to solve it with the same tools which created it.

There is great interest in the body in a hypermodern world, both because of the pre-eminence of the individual, and because lives are more materially focussed. This is not just consumerism; a material focus can be seen in areas of social interest such as the drive to improve bodily health. This paradigm of scientific advancement is an aspect of what Foucault called “bio-power” which connects the optimisation of the physical capacities of the body – “an anatomo-politics of the human body” – to the biological processes of the body – “a bio-politics of the population” (1978 pp.140, 139). Activity around these two poles illustrates the exercises and procedures of power through the new forms of surveillance and control, and the creation of a “relation of docility-utility” (1978 p.137). These features of modernity (Foucault, 1977) have become more complete through the technologies available in hypermodern times. Regulation is not simply physical but ideological, and it can be both overt (rules and laws) and subtle (social mores and norms).

The construction of norms also creates the possibility for their deconstruction (Butler, 2011, Foucault, 1978). This is the “power-network” (Foucault, 1978 p.75), through which power and resistance to power each continually create and change the other, loading practices with new meaning. As technology spreads into areas as intimate as conception and birth, the medicalization of the body (LaFleur, 1998, McGuire, 1990) and the ability to alter it to suit socially created norms of beauty have contributed to a solely physical rather than a holistic focus. There has also been a corresponding reaction, seen in

the growth of alternative medicine, holistic therapies and campaigns about 'real' or natural beauty. Approaches to BDSM also illustrate such a process – for example accounts of kink being utilised to address traumas of abuse offer a challenge to discourses of physically expressed psychopathology (Cross and Matheson, 2006, Easton and Hardy, 2004, Kleinplatz and Moser, 2007, Langdrige and Barker, 2007b, Ortmann and Sprott, 2013).

As a culture of radical individualism hypermodernity denies and minimises the relational functions of the body. Individuals are viewed as autonomous, unitary selves who are wholly responsible for themselves and their happiness, and creators of their own identity. Through such construction the human body has become a means, some might argue the only means, by which contemporary people achieve self-determination and authenticity (Lyng, 2012, Varga, 2005). It can be argued that BDSM, definitely outside the mainstream and potentially transgressing the law, is claiming a freedom to use one's body as one wills in defiance of norms of pleasure (MacKendrick, 1999). Wegierski recognises several areas of potential resistance to the "hyper-technological, hyper-liberal, hyper-capitalist, homogenised and polymorphous social construct" (1995 p.23) of hypermodernity. These are discourses which reject the subject/object distinction as an absolute, movements of ecological or environmental activism, and new spiritualities seeking to re-enchant the world. These movements do not disregard political, social and economic realities but neither are they motivated by them. The vision they promote is not the "ever-expanding human monoculture" of hypermodernity, but "a regionally diverse and interdependent web of... technologically sophisticated, vernacular cultures tuned to the structure and pulse of particular places" (Abram, 1997 p.272). Reconnecting with the world constitutes a recognition and reassertion of the necessity of limits on "our exploitation of physical nature" (Wegierski, 1995 p.23); BDSM, in its explorations of different limits and boundaries, has a potential part in such a reassertion for the individuals involved.

From Hypermodernity to Edgework

The hypermodern world is a world of risk (Beck, 2013) but not, in the main, the kinds of risk that human beings evolved to deal with. The risks of this world are of a scale and complexity which renders many of the evolved skills of personal, physical survival irrelevant, and new risks arise from attempts to overcome existing ones. Everyday life involves risks about which there is no choice, some of which may even be beyond comprehension (Lyng, 2012). In short, it is a world of “chaos, as opposed to the order of cosmos” (Varga, 2005 p.231). The elements which make this chaos help shape the ways in which the human body is experienced, viewed and treated. So by placing oneself into situations where real physical risk is confronted and overcome, meaning can be found within the chaos. A tacit agreement with this informs Lyng's (1990) concept of edgework, a useful framework for understanding the potential power and appeal of BDSM.

Lyng (1990, 2005) suggests that some people are drawn to situations of voluntary risk where there is either no clear reward at all, or where the experience itself is given higher value than any possible results of it. People engaging in such risk-taking are exploring ‘the edge’, a boundary like those “between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness ... sanity and insanity” or “order and disorder, form and formlessness” (1990 pp.855, 858). Edgework activities seek to come as close as possible to these edges, pushing personal and/or technological limits, and returning safely. Although the concept has been used to cover a wide range of activities (as diverse as extreme sports, graffiti and stock-market trading) it does not automatically apply to any risk-taking activity. In edgework, individuals engage in behaviour that challenges “the presumptive safe limits of human activity” (Bromley, 2007 p.289), deliberately risking physical or psychological injury or death. But the risk is met with the skill of the edgeworker and death or injury is thus likely to be viewed as their failure to control the risk appropriately, rather than an

indictment of the activity (Laurendeau, 2006). Activities where the outcome is essentially a matter of chance, such as gambling, should not be regarded as edgework (Lyng, 1990) because it is the meeting of risk with skill, reacting to chaos with self-control, that enables one to both approach the edge and return safely from it.

The word 'edge' is in common use within the BDSM community – 'edge-play' describes activities which people within the community see as pushing limits. There is no universal consensus on what constitutes edge-play, but activities such as fire-, breath- or needle-play, cutting and electro-play would commonly be included. These activities are seen as physically risky, the type of risk which has primarily been associated with Lyng's original edgework concept. Other forms of edge-play, such as role-play which recreates scenes of abuse, carry a different sort of risk. But these emotional or psychological risks can still be regarded as edges requiring skill to traverse and return safely (Newmahr, 2011a).

The edgework concept is related to the Foucauldian concept of limit-experience - described by Foucault as an idea "that wrenches the subject from itself", challenges normative constructions of reality (including of sex) and thereby propels the subject's project of identify re-formation cited by (Trombadori, 2000 cited in Sluga, 2003 p.224). Either edgework or limit-experience and either concept could be applicable to specific occasions of BDSM play (Holmes et al., 2006). Lyng distinguishes the two on the basis that the "limit attitude" seeks to transgress boundaries, rather than to transcend them by "controlling the seemingly uncontrollable" (Lyng, 2005b p.45). He concludes edgework is the broader term, although specific experiences of the edge might also be considered limit-experiences.

Experiences of the edge as described by Lyng (1990, 2012) – including altered perceptions of self, situation, space and time, dissolution of the self-object boundary

and/or a sense of 'hyper-reality' – could result from most forms of BDSM (Easton and Hardy, 2004). This means that an activity could be classed as edgework even if the actor would not call it edge-play. Care must therefore be taken not to treat edge-play and edgework as interchangeable terms. Newmahr, aware of the distinction, describes all BDSM as edgework. In her view BDSM, seen against its broader social context, clearly pushes normative, social, emotional and psychological boundaries; it explores “the edges of morality... the liminal spaces between liberty and constraint, kindness and cruelty, and goodness and badness” (Newmahr, 2011a p.698). This resonates with a view of BDSM practice as a process of ritualising which creates spaces “standing... consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life” (Huizinga, 1950 p.13) within which different potentialities can be shaped and explored.

The edgework concept has also been used in religious studies. Bromley coined the term “spiritual edgework” to describe radical or extreme ritual practices, involving actual risk of physical injury for participants (2007). His examples are fire-walking, categorised as a New Age practice, and serpent-handling within the Holiness tradition. Bromley argues that religion is a social form, which humans use to create a sense of empowerment. One of the aspects that makes religion complex is that it is “through creating a sense of power that... [people] transcend the power available to them in the everyday world... humans gain control by ceding control” (Bromley, 2007 p.300). For some, this connection with power occurs through the extreme practices of spiritual edgework, which create situations of danger and mythic weight, into which tension is built through ritual sequence. Ultimately, the participants confront that danger directly, and the tension is resolved by their survival in “a transformational moment when a connection with transcendent power is experienced directly” (2007 p.294).

When BDSM is viewed as edgework it connects clearly with Bromley's exemplars. In general terms neither BDSM practitioners, fire-walkers nor serpent-handlers “‘mainstream’ comfortably” (Bromley, 2007 p.288), so are commonly dismissed as anomalous and/or pathological. All three activities involve notions of personal power that are distinct from everyday roles and understanding, and all have the potential to create intense experiences of connection and transformation. More specifically, all create events and/or sensations which may be perceived initially as being beyond participants' limits, together with opportunities to transcend those limits. Members of all three communities regard people who attempt the activity in ignorance of the necessary skills or preparations as foolish. In each context a liminal space is practiced into existence, so that participants can choose to “step outside of safe space” (Bromley, 2007 p.296). Fire and serpents can be symbolically associated with life and death, creation or destruction; they also invoke primal fears. BDSM likewise uses symbolically weighty and fear-inducing tools – needles, knives, electricity – and plays with existential anxieties such as engulfment, petrification and implosion (Langdridge, 2005). The risks involved in all these activities are real. But, in common with other edgework activities, it is not as great a risk as the casual observer may imagine, owing to the range of skills developed and employed by the participants.

Edgework of all kinds shares the possibility of creating intense, profound experiences (Lyng, 1990), and these may be connected with religious concepts by the edgeworkers concerned (Sanford, 2007, Snyder, 2007, Taylor, 2007). The notion that this kind of experience is sufficient reward in itself to be worth the risks supports Varga's (2005) suggestion that, as cultural focus shifts away from internal non-physical awareness/experience and towards the physical, the body has become sacred. Exploring the sacred via physical experience is not new; throughout human history people have found the body to be their “most readily accessible altar or temple” (LaFleur, 1998 p.37), but it has found new forms of expression and, perhaps, a new urgency within

hypermodernity. If the sacred is an intangible “guiding principle around which people centre their values, surrounding it with awe and adulation” (Varga, 2005 pp.229-30) then physical experiences which enable one to encounter that intangible, indescribable ‘something’ take on a new significance. Varga argues that the hypermodern individual who is “living under the pressures of everyday life and in value-uncertainty, turns his or her main concern to the body” (2005 p.231). Lyng (1990, 2012) suggests that increasing numbers of such individuals find that the same society that offers such material ‘quality of life’ also contributes to the loss of any sense of personal authorship and/meaningful focus to life. This propels people towards the exploration of limit, in search of themselves and humanity – in short, hypermodernity pushes some people towards edgework.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have given an overview of the various strands of academic literature which have informed my research into BDSM and of where and how my research fits among them. In sum, I consider the contemporary world to be in a state of hypermodernity, which places a high value on autonomy and regards every individual as wholly responsible for their own happiness and the creation of their own identity. I place BDSM within this context as a possible means of exploring boundaries and relationality between animate living persons, and as an element of identity construction. Through these practices profound experiences, felt to be different from the stream of everyday experience, are created and reflected upon. These dynamic explorations are understood by me as contributors to personal processes of religioning as individuals experiment with their living reality, practising ritual spaces into existence and immersing themselves into these other-wheres. I utilise the frame of religioning, not to impose a contentious category onto these practices, but as a lens through which the apparently disparate strands of meaning drawn out by individual players can be understood within the broader context of human

relationship with complex webs that contribute to world-, meaning- and story-making (see pp. 14-15 for more on this decision).

My research draws upon literature addressing the role and importance of human bodies in making and experiencing religion, on the concepts of religious experience and on the sociological concept of edgework. It is certainly possible to identify other potential frames for analysis, such as gender, class or race. BDSM performance can “simultaneously draw on and disavow” (Weiss, 2011 p.27) such social referents as these, and Bauer’s (2014) study of the “dyke+queer BDSM” community suggests the exploration of particular areas of social difference is an explicit concern across some kink communities. However, among my less specific group of research participants, elements such as these were not commonly referenced as aspects of play experience. I have therefore not devoted discrete chapters to these social referents, but neither have I ignored them. By concerning myself with themes such as boundaries, transgression and self-exploration I have been able to honour these social concerns where they arose for an individual (for example see Javelin’s account of a “reclaiming ritual” on page 259) without focussing on areas that were not of explicit concern to most among my participants.

The thematic strands which shape each chapter emerged from conversations with specific people about their personal kink and their understanding of it, set by me within a framework of religioning as a means of understanding of how the diverse practices of BDSM contribute to the living reality of a person within their world. It would be possible to consider BDSM in relation to each of these strands in isolation, but it is not my intention to present it as religioning solely on the basis that individual elements of it can look something like more formal varieties of religion. Instead each of these identified strands

should be understood as one possible factor within the whole complex experience of kink, and thus as contributing to the gestalt of the whole.

In the next chapter I complete the positioning of my research in relation to the underlying approach and the methods I employed in carrying out my research conversations.

4 – Siting My Research: Approaches and Methods

I am not yet at that place where a coherent story can be told..., nor do I expect ever to arrive there. Nonetheless there are some things that must be spoken with the full awareness that the words will inevitably miss their cue, arriving too late or too soon, or not even finding the theatre. Although I make no claims to speak for a community, I am also not an outsider looking in. The outside/in relationship does not exist in my writing, because I inhabit both these spaces, sometimes simultaneously, but not always.

– (Hart, 1998 p.3)

This chapter discusses the conceptual framework and the practical aspects of this research, explaining methodological decisions and offering an overview of the research process. While the study can be briefly summarised as the collecting of experiential accounts of BDSM encounters, reflections by the individual on those experiences and the thematic analysing of resulting material, it is necessary to dig deeper into the processes of collection and analysis in order to make situated and responsible knowledge claims (Haraway, 1988). I begin by siting my research within a broad epistemological position, followed by a consideration of the process of collecting material and a discussion of the place of the researcher in these processes.

Research Questions

The principal aim of my research was an exploration of BDSM experience, as it emerges from the complex interactions of kink activities and relationships which contribute to the making of a BDSM scene. This exploration is made in relation to a broad concept of religion as lived and living: a process that is inseparable from the material situation in which it arises and/or to which it responds, and which is intimately concerned with relationship, embodied practice, kinaesthetic experience and the narratives used to

make sense of these. My central research question is to ask whether BDSM can be considered part of processes of individual religioning. In addressing this question, I am necessarily exploring the category of religion, and theorising when something shifts from outside that category to inside it.

Conceptual Foundations

In both academic and non-academic discourse ‘experience’ is a common term, but it is also complex and contested – perhaps one of “the most potent and ambiguous words in English” (Haraway, 1991 p.1). Its use within religious studies is especially fraught, involving debate about ineffability, accessibility and the relevance of wholly internal states. One strand within religious studies has sought to cast personal experience as a universal aspect of religion, constituted by the same core elements regardless of context or culture. If these subjective and internal states are presented as both autonomous and wholly personal, they are then placed beyond critique or challenge (Sharf, 1998, Williams, 2012). I distance my understanding of experience from this position. I intend the term to invoke a “lived process” (Smith et al., 2009), which recognises individual people as being embedded in nature and culture, drawing from and conditioned by a range of resources including ecological, biological, psychological and socio-cultural (Vásquez, 2011).

People are holistic entities, with both physiological and psychological processes contributing to the creation of that whole. They are situated within a network of relationships to others and to the world, and they not only act within that world, they also “reflect on what they do and... [this] has meaningful, existential consequences” (Smith et al., 2009 p.34). A personal account of both actions and reflections therefore demonstrates the unique perspective of the individual, within their holistic and situated relationship to their world. My commitment has been to engage with these perspectives. This requires reflection, not only on what I expected verbal accounts of experience would reveal to me –

which is a participants' personal interpretation of events rather than an account constituting a direct form of access to the experience as it is lived – but also on the necessity of attempting to communicate non-verbal elements of experience.

Any descriptive account is structured and created by both the individual sharing it and the audience to which it is directed. In this research context, both speaker and audience are human, first-person bodies – bodies “that we know directly in the context or process of being alive,... that we cannot take apart and put back together again,... the centre and origin of our being in the world, [bodies] whose biological reality is neither separable from, nor a third person dimension of its lived and living presence” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b p.20). A given experience necessarily incorporates not only sensory information, the production of various chemicals within the body and the processes of cognition, but also the socio-cultural context in which all this is situated, and the language(s) and relationships in which we are all immersed. All this is constantly present.

It is true to say that we are all experiencing all of the time, in and through the process of being alive. However, moments of experience can be singled out, designated as ‘An Experience’, which stands out from this constant state. This involves drawing a boundary around a small section of the stream of experiencing and focussing the attention on specific elements. A BDSM “scene” is a particular example of one of these marked out bubbles. It is not wholly removed from its context – it does not float above the stream – but is identifiable (to the experiencer) as a cluster of sensations, emotions, relationships that is distinct from the general flow of these things through everyday life.

I have emphasised the importance of recognising context. As there are innumerable strands which contribute to context, and so impact on experience, I offer here only a brief summary of the cultural milieu within which I place the practice of BDSM. The contemporary world, at least the parts of it inhabited by my research participants,

retains all the trends which characterised modernity, with the arguable exception of a general belief in human progress towards utopia. Capitalism, industrialisation, technology, rationalisation, institutions and surveillance are not only present, but dominant and continually expanding. The values which shaped modernity have passed into “a logic of excess” (Charles, 2009 p.391) where it is almost impossible to oppose them, or even conceive of alternatives. There is an excess of control, observation and consumption, existing in tension with an extension of individual autonomy to fields as diverse as politics, morality and fashion. Self-fulfilment is placed among the highest virtues. All this creates a world suffused with a vast but purposeless enthusiasm for change and novelty (Lipovetsky and Charles, 2005), with the human body as a focus (Varga, 2005). This is a hypermodern world.

The relevance of this context to this research lies in the impact of hypermodernity on the ways phenomena are conceived. In contemporary popular discourses religion is understood in ways that owe a great deal to Protestant forms of Christianity, developed in specific historical and social contexts (Asad, 1993). These understandings are popularly presented as a universal concept of religion, creating the impression that to own, accept or belong to a religion is to uncritically accept doctrines about both internal matters (like belief in deity) and external behaviours which reflect agreed moral values. In hypermodernity, the value placed on personal choice contributes to rejections of institutional religion, as doctrine is seen as interfering with personal autonomy. Ideas of personal development and fulfilment retain great importance, and practices, attitudes and values which contribute to this process share that value. They cannot be named religion by the hypermodern individual because of the way in which that term is perceived, and so an alternative name is chosen: spirituality.

For many people spirituality is recognised as a fuzzy category, incorporating any and all of the hard-to-quantify things that contribute to a sense of meaning in life, to personal narrative, and to embracing, encountering or experiencing the non-physical. This view of the spiritual owes much to concepts such as the New Age and 'alternative' spirituality (Heelas et al., 2005, Partridge, 2004) and often incorporates practices drawn from religious traditions. Partridge describes the process of emergent spiritualities as one of both secularisation and sacralisation – a confluence in which “spiritualities are emerging that are not only quite different from the dying forms of religion, but are often defined over against them” (2004 p.4). The dominant view among my research participants conceived spirituality in these terms, as dealing with the same 'stuff' as religion, but in a more personalised and autonomous way. Knowing this, and being fully aware of the negative associations many had with the concept of religion as they understood it, I have nevertheless chosen religion as my core term and this decision requires some justification.

I have already observed that even people who consider themselves spiritual regard the category as somewhat fuzzy. Like religion, it is generally used as if its meaning is obvious, and this usage contributes to the confusion which creates spiritual/religious binary. Framing religion as, at the core, belief in deity may or may not support such a distinction, but if religion is instead considered as practice, as experience, as a living element within individual lives, drawing such a line is unhelpful. To maintain the spiritual/religious binary in the context of my research would have required me to make sharp distinctions between people practising BDSM as a personal aspect of a named religion, people who find BDSM meaningful or transformative without referring to it in spiritual terms, and people who practice explicitly labelled “sacred kink” (Harrington, 2009). Since all these people are engaging in the same group of practices, and speaking of their experiences in comparable terms, such absolute distinctions can only cloud the picture. Instead I concur with Streib and Hood's (2011) conclusion that the concepts of

‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’ are too closely related to separate so absolutely. I choose religion as my key term, while recognising that spirituality retains importance for many of my research participants. This allows an individual's own understanding of their practice to be honoured, while rendering the artificial distinction of different approaches to the same activity unnecessary.

Participants in my Research

Between Sept 2014 and August 2015, I carried out forty-six qualitative semi-structured interviews with forty-four self-identified practitioners of BDSM. These interviews ranged in length from one to four hours, with an average length of one hundred and thirty-two minutes. The sample was obtained largely via snowballing, with the initial sample consisting of people whom I already knew. I also posted calls for participants on the online BDSM network fetlife.com and through real-world social communities (munches). Nineteen out of the forty-six interviews resulted from these sources.

I chose not to formally collect demographic material from my participants in order to better ensure their anonymity. Therefore, I cannot offer a precise picture of the group make-up in terms of age, race, gender or other potentially identifiable personal information. However, I can make some general observations.

The age range was very broad, spanning early twenties to mid-seventies. The number of years they had been actively practising their kinks also varied greatly, from less than two to more than fifty years. Beyond the obvious fact that the younger participants could not yet have achieved a fifty-year play history, there was no clear connection between age and the length of their involvement in kink – people can and do discover their kinks at any age. Unusually for studies of BDSM, I did not focus on a single community based within a single geographical area; I spoke with people living in all parts of the UK as well as smaller numbers living in the US, Europe, and Asia. Not all of my research

participants were British nationals, nor were all resident in their countries of origin.

Minority ethnic groups are under-represented in my sample, although not wholly absent.⁵

The limited demographic information available from other studies suggests that a disproportionately Caucasian sample is not unusual (Bauer, 2014, Newmahr, 2011b, Weiss, 2011), although reasons why this should be are unclear.

Information regarding gender and sexuality arose quite often during conversations, so I can report most my participants appeared to be cisgendered and/or felt no need to declare themselves otherwise in the context of our conversation. I interviewed one genderfluid and one intersex individual; two others identified as queer. Three participants described themselves explicitly as polyamorous, and eighteen referred to play relationships with multiple partners without using that term. Committed and primary relationships appeared to be heterosexual for all participants, but conclusions about sexual identity or orientation should not be drawn from this. Several people in apparently heterosexual relationships explicitly identified in other ways, and even where no such identification was discussed, the described play relationships suggest greater diversity. It is also important to remember that BDSM play need not be sexual in nature, so conventional understandings of sexual orientation are likely to prove an inadequate basis for understanding relationships in this context.

Common academic practice casts preferred BDSM roles in three broad categories: tops, bottoms and switches. Using these it could be said that I interviewed eighteen tops, eleven bottoms and fifteen switches, but these are not the categories many people choose in describing themselves. Looking at the personally preferred terms gives a different picture: I interviewed four tops, eight switches, one switch with no interest in power exchange, one collared switch, twelve Doms/Dommes, eight submissives, two slaves, one

⁵ More specific information could constitute a risk to anonymity

sadist, one sadomasochist, one fetish practitioner, one primal, one Daddy, one TV sub, and two people who were undecided or unsure. Although everyone had a preferred descriptor, five people shared theirs together with an explicit dislike of accepting any label; they were expressing a preference for situations where a label is required rather than naming a clear identification with a specifically defined role.

The research sample included 2 lifestyle couples, 5 people who were in lifestyle relationships with people who did not participate in the research and 4 couples who had both a BDSM and a romantic relationship but who did not describe their relationship as lifestyle. Where it did not arise in conversation about their BDSM practice I did not ask about relationship status. I left it open to couples to choose whether to speak with me together or separately; one of the lifestyle couples chose to do so and one did not. Only one of the other couples chose to have separate conversations.

Understanding of the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' formed one of my interview themes and I asked individuals explicitly what each term meant to them and whether they identified with either or both. Eleven people identified with both terms; fourteen people identified in some degree with spirituality, although differing understandings of the term, and different degrees of certainty as to its application were present. Nineteen people did not connect either term with themselves. In light of my decision not to regard spirituality and religion as separate entities it is interesting to note that no one identified as religious without also considering themselves spiritual, while among those who identified with both terms were four people who explicitly rejected the idea of any significant difference between the two. Of those who identified only with spirituality, three expressed their views of religion in hostile terms, as did two of the people who rejected both terms. Six people who did not feel a connection with either term said they had never thought about the concepts in relation to themselves. There were also four people who rejected the term

religion but also identified with traditions often understood as falling within that category – namely paganism and Buddhism.

The Research Process

My requirements for participation in the research were only that they had some real-world experience of doing BDSM, in whatever form that took for them, and that their kink was important to them. The concepts entailed in this requirement were unpacked and explored through the research conversations. I did not exclude anyone who approached me but not every approach resulted in participation; two people withdrew their interest based on a dislike of audio-recording, ten simply stopped responding to my messages at various stages, and 36 people requested information about the research but expressed no further interest.

The interviews were informal and semi-structured and I sought to make them conversational in nature. To ensure there was consistency in the areas we discussed I had an interview schedule, but this was flexible in format and allowed for changes in sequence, off-topic conversation and two-way questioning.

Consent was recorded verbally at the start of each interview.⁶ This method was chosen due to the ambiguous legal status of BDSM and the potential social stigma arising from association with it. Although prosecutions of consenting parties are rare, and talking or writing about consensual acts of BDSM has not been regarded as criminal, I felt that a recorded verbal statement would be more acceptable to most members of this community than a written record, signed with their real name.

Most of the interviews took place face-to-face in neutral locations chosen by the individual being interviewed. I also carried out six interviews via Skype, with people outside

⁶ The text of this statement is in Appendix C

the UK. During the conversations we explored a range of areas including the kinds of experience they had had, what it is like to play in the ways they choose to play, what constitutes personal limits and edges, what makes a scene what it is, the nature of the spaces created by and through play, the relationships that are played out in these spaces, the importance of the kink community, kink as an aspect of lifestyle and identity and their ideas about religion and spirituality (both in general and in relation to kink). The different areas of interest were dealt with as they arose, rather than in a prescribed order.

These were reciprocal and dialogic conversations in which I shared my own experiences with people if they asked me for them, or if the conversation called for exemplification. This auto-ethnographic element to my research requires further explanation.

Situated Knowledges

Haraway (1988, 1991) dismisses the idea of the scholarly observer who supposedly sees all but stands nowhere, and who can thus represent without being represented, as an illusion. The objectivity this “god trick” (1988 p.582) claims to provide is irresponsible, because it cannot be called to account. Haraway calls instead for partial, locatable and embodied situated knowledges, which do not seek to deny the interpretive nature of knowledge claims. Knowledge is produced through processes of recognition, acknowledgement, interpretation, translation and “stuttering and partial understanding” (Bauer, 2014 p.10). I, like my research participants, am a bodily entity, positioned within particular and specific social settings and power relations. Each person involved in a research interview contributes their own situated knowledge, but the researcher has the additional task of critically situating all partners, including themselves, in “a critical, polyphonic and power-sensitive conversation” (Bauer, 2014 p.10). I therefore make no

claims to reveal a single truth in the chapters which follow; instead I identify and explore open-ended and fluid concepts that contradict and connect in various ways.

To make my partial and situated knowledge apparent is to enable shared and critical conversation that privileges contestation, construction and connection (Haraway, 1988) and to allow those situated knowledges to be held to account for their situatedness. I do not intend that the summary I give here function as a list of essentialised categories into which I fit myself, but rather as identifications of the various “strategic-political positionings” (Bauer, 2014 p.10) which inform all levels of this academic work. With this in mind, I offer the following identifiable strands which inform my positioning in relation to my research: I am a white, cisgendered female, pagan, BDSM sub and masochist with a middle-class background and a previous career in Secondary-level teaching of Religious Studies.

Putting My Self into My Research

I did not originally set out to do auto-ethnographic research; my intention was to collect experiential accounts of BDSM encounters, together with participants' reflections on these experiences. It was while considering the non-linguistic aspects of experience that the presence of my own experiences began to appear. It is certainly true to say that the only access another person can give me to their experience is a linguistic account, but it is also true to say that my understanding of that account is not solely dependent on the words they choose and any explanations of those words that they offer. It also involves the responses and somatic memories created in me by those words.

My expectation was that my membership of the community with which I am concerned might prove to be a factor in the decisions of some to participate; I decided that making this explicit was more likely to be reassuring than off-putting for potential participants. I expected that people would note my ‘insider’ status and some would ask

questions about my personal interests. Following that, I thought I would bracket my 'self' out of the discussion while we both focussed on them and the "structures and meaning embedded in [their] lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990 p.11). Instead I found myself agreeing with Muncey that there is a distinction between looking for "the meaning of an experience and meaning in an experience" (2010 p.42), and realising that I was interested in the latter. I was not asking my participants what made their experiences meaningful in the sense of a deep philosophical quest, although the structure of the interview schedule I began with may have looked that way. What I wanted was for people to tell me about BDSM in their lives by describing events they found important. This has made me more acutely aware of my own stories, the ways they have encoded themselves into my body and my psyche, how they both enhance and limit my connection to the stories I hear, and contribute to the unfolding of my research conversations. My practice has therefore been a pattern of reflexive interviewing where I have not only posed questions and recorded answers, but noticed and shared my personal experience and commented on "the unfolding communication between both parties" (Etherington, 2004 p.77).

My involvement in my research is more than that of my digital recorder. I have not collected material without interacting with it. I am fully present in the research relationships I have formed with my participants. I have shared myself with them in response to what they shared with me. My reactions to and interpretations of their thoughts and insights are affected by my own experiences with BDSM. In the transcripts are descriptions and reflections which were elicited from me by my research participants in the same way I drew these things from them, and I have used some of these in my analysis. In doing so I concur with Newmahr's (2008) assertion that such self-study is more than simple introspection; it involves an integration of subjective material and critical knowledge. While this does give the work an auto-ethnographical element it is not positioned wholly within that domain, as the focus of my analysis has been on the

interview material I gathered (Bauer, 2014). Where I have used my own experiences directly I have tried to acknowledge them as such, but in places where to acknowledge particular material as my own would endanger the anonymity of others I have used an assigned name to cite the material.

Being Vulnerable

Behar describes her ethnographic work as a long voyage encompassing “the longing for memory, the desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something” (1996 p.3). She further notes this is not the description of her work she would usually give people, since it doesn't sound like the stuff of which research is made. This observation contains one way in which including an auto-ethnographic element can make the researcher vulnerable – by opening them to the judgement that it is not ‘proper’ research, or that the self of the researcher is somehow a “contaminant” (Muncey, 2010 p.97). Etherington identifies the risk of being pathologised (2004), a matter of particular concern to a researcher who has chosen to identify with a behaviour or group commonly subject to negative judgement. There is also the possibility that auto-ethnographic research will be viewed as solipsistic or self-indulgent (Muncey, 2010).

These are not risks of which I am unaware, or to which I am indifferent, but I see good reasons to take them. Etherington describes researchers who “acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts (which might be fluid and changing) inform the process and outcomes of inquiry” (2004 pp.31-32) as reflexive researchers. This reflexivity should be deliberate and intentional; a means to an end, “not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake” (Behar, 1996 p.14), but a way to take the work somewhere it could not

otherwise go. I do not regard my research conversations as windows onto a truth which is 'out there' somewhere; instead they create a reality, constituted through both the telling and the responses to that telling – a co-created truth. Through dialogic conversation "new meanings are created and new selves are constituted" (Etherington, 2004 p.77); thus by allowing ourselves to be seen and known in the context of our research new possibilities open up. Etherington observes that hearing a repetition of one's own words enables us to "notice (sometimes for the first time) what we are really thinking" and another's summary of our thoughts can help create "links between ideas, stories, experiences and relationships of which we had been hitherto unaware" (2004 p.29). Questions also draw attention to things which may otherwise go unnoticed in body language, reactions, and underlying assumptions. In sum, when another person reflects back to us what they see, our own view is enhanced. It is this reflexive awareness of the researcher's presence within their own research that allows for the co-creation of many-layered stories that "honour the messiness and complexity of human life" (Etherington, 2004 p.28).

I concur with Behar's observation that "not only is the observer vulnerable, but so too, yet more profoundly, are those whom we observe" (1996 p.24). There is an ethical dimension to recognising the researcher's presence in the research and, in sharing my own attempts to make meaning out of my experiences and my reflections on the process in which we are collaboratively engaged, I hope to at least share, if not mitigate, some of the potential vulnerability of my participants. Through striving for transparency – not only about methods and epistemologies but about personal values, responses and the voices and selves who speak in my writing – I seek to make the co-constructed nature of the stories I tell evident, and the process of that construction more accessible to my readers (Etherington, 2004).

Etherington suggests that by sharing herself with research participants she is able to “balance the power relations” (2004 p.22) in the interview situation. A research participant is likely to feel a degree of vulnerability from the outset, and it is in the researcher's power to increase or attempt to diminish that. Many of my participants expressed initial concerns about not having ‘the right kind’ of experiences to share with me. Some worried they were not extreme enough or they were too extreme; or they did not fit into the commonly delineated categories of BDSM, while others felt they should apologise for their word choices or for the fact that the ‘right’ words were difficult to find. They might not have chosen the term vulnerable, or spoken of the interview situation in terms of power dynamic, but a degree of imbalance between us was clearly felt. The BDSM community is, if not precisely closed, certainly private. Its activities are legally questionable and subject to common misinterpretation. Lee observes that populations which are “vulnerable or highly stigmatised” because of their behaviour are more likely to find in-depth interviews “a difficult business” (1993 p.67), and in my view my willingness to be open about what I had and had not done, would and would not do, had found difficult to understand or explain to myself, enabled my participants to “reach more deeply into [their] lived experience” (Etherington, 2004 p.77) than might otherwise have been the case.

‘Getting it’ – Addressing Expectations

For me to make my own values, attitudes and experience clear as they relate to my research requires careful and critical reflection, and is only partially achievable. Research participants also bring their values and attitudes to conversations, and these are similarly involved in what is said and shared between us. To some of these things I have no access at all, and some I can identify as possible or likely through analysis and interpretation, but there is one common expectation to which I have been given explicit access by several my

participants: a feeling that I 'got it'. Because of the way this feeling interacts with the role of my own experience in the research, the idea of 'getting it' (or not doing so) is worth unpacking further.

The BDSM community is perceived as hard for researchers to access (Beckmann, 2009) and it certainly fits Lee's (1993) definition of a sensitive topic, in that research into it is potentially threatening for those involved. Even when gatekeepers can be found there is a common attitude, within the UK Scene at least, that 'vanillas' (people who do not practice BDSM in any form) just don't get it. This perception is not simply an expression of concern about stereotypes, or a recognition of the need to explain the meaning of some insider terms. It is the idea that there is an inevitable shortfall between what can be grasped by a person on the outside, and what is known by a person on the inside.

The knowledge that I had complementary physical and emotional experience on which to draw as we talked seemed to reassure my participants that I would get it in a way that a researcher lacking that experience could not. This seems to me both more subtle and more interesting than an assumed similarity of the qualities present in the experience of both parties; it is rather an embodied knowledge of the complexity of sensation and relationship explored within the other world of play-spaces. I certainly felt a difference in the nature of the conversations I had with people who only top, but this difference was not so much an absence of common experience as it was a recognition that our separate experiences were complementary. Similarly, when talking to people who choose the bottom role but whose kinks are very different to my own, the experiences we discussed cannot be presumed to be shared. Nevertheless, the sense that I would get what they told me remained.

Having been an active practitioner for many years I cannot know what it is like to be a non-practitioner researching BDSM. But, like my participants, I have talked with

people outside the BDSM Scene about what it is that we do. The sense of people just not getting it is familiar to me. The idea is an important one because it captures more than judgement, assumption, community-specific language and similar things that a conscientious researcher could take steps to address. Being “non-censorious” (Lee, 1993 p.97), non-threatening, and prepared to accept that people are being truthful is after all a matter of simple courtesy. But attempting to achieve even a partial understanding of complex lived experience is not a purely intellectual process. The choice of the phrase ‘not getting it’, in preference to ‘they don't understand’, seems to imply a recognition that there is another element. What is required is a grasping of BDSM rather than a cognitive understanding.

When a speaker selects words to describe an experience they draw on their own associations with those words. Where the listener has very different associations a level of miscommunication is inevitable. Simply put, they will just have to take your word for it. Seligman et al. (2008) observe that an internal feeling that you are in love and the process of saying so in words, no matter how heartfelt, is insufficient as a foundation for a long term relationship if you do not also act as if you are in love. Rooting the matter solely in words, as an expression of an inaccessible personal truth, means that “it can never finally prove its own sincerity” (Seligman et al, 2008 p.106). I suggest much the same is true when we try to understand what we are told of experiences in opposition to our personal somatic experience. As a life-long teetotaler who is nauseated by both the smell and taste of alcohol, I must take on trust that drinking is a pleasure; with a store of negative encounters with drunk people, and the chance to observe extreme drunkenness from a totally sober standpoint, I have difficulty in seeing the desirability of that state. I can intellectually accept that someone is telling me their truth in describing their experience as enjoyable, but all the relevant experiences and associations I have with what they say disagrees wholly with their words. I just don't get it in a way that resonates with my

physicality, with my emotions and intuitions, with all the non-linguistic forms of knowledge about drunkenness to which I have access. My acceptance of the words as communicating truth from an individual perspective cannot remove or overcome that, and it will always flavour, to some degree, what I have to say about the state of being and the process of achieving drunkenness. The reality experienced by others does not exist on a wavelength I am equipped to receive; however genuinely I listen and strive to connect, the nagging suspicion that I just do not get it will persist, at some level, for both of us.

It is for this reason that I disagree with Lindemann's assertion that the question of whether participation might impact on her ethnography is "only relevant in the context of the insider/outsider problem – not in regard to the particular content of the act in question" (2012 p.17). Neither do I agree with the fullest extent of Newmahr's conclusion that she "would not be able to understand SM without doing SM" (2008 p.624). I would say rather that activities in which one has never participated can be understood to an extent, but that a layer of embodied knowledge gained through participation will be missing. This does not need to be a disadvantage, neither is it intrinsically an advantage. Which it becomes depends on the nature and aim of the research. Since my research is rooted in lived experiences it seems an advantage to me to have that additional layer of knowledge and important to unpack the constituents of that knowledge.

The process of experiencing is a "quasi-chaos" (James, 2003 p.33), incorporating many various and constantly changing elements. To identify something that may be called 'An Experience' is a process of picking through the complex mesh of these elements to arrive at a perception of the whole which satisfies. This is only the last point in "a train of sensations, emotions, decisions, movements, expectations, etc., ending in the present, and the first term of a series of 'inner' operations, extending into the future" (James, 2003 p.7). Any coherent linguistic account is constructed later, and will struggle to do justice to the

“non-rational and vaguer aspects” (Blum, 2012 p.209) present in that initial quasi-chaos; both the world and the self within the world are experienced “in wordless ways before we come to language our experience” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b p.364). The challenge for the researcher is thus to recognise the complex whole of experience, including any non-rational elements, in a way which is both intelligible and which contributes to the research process. The challenge inherent in languaging experience (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009a) is in finding adequate words to achieve a “descriptive rendering of the dynamic phenomenon” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b p.363) which creates a sense of having done justice to the phenomenon itself, and also to the experiencers knowledge of it. What is experientially felt and known is challenging to render into words because “language is not experience in the first place” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b p.364).

This is not intended as a claim for the ineffability of experience. Language may be incomplete (or even fundamentally inadequate) to describe some elements of experience but still experiences are described, and the descriptions are not wholly unintelligible. Where the qualities of an experience exceed language, words or phrases can be deployed in ways which deliberately distort, undermine or expand on the ‘ordinary’ or common sense usage (Bauer, 2014, Coggins, 2015). These are neither coded messages nor protectionist avoidance of discussion, but attempts to draw attention to the aspects that are challenging to describe, and so harder to capture in a way which might evoke something comparable in the body of the listener. Such phrases used within a community might also be intended to evoke memories, or otherwise contribute to forms of communication that do not rely upon words.

Experiences of BDSM are rarely talked about in any detail, but the social context in which they occur offers a shorthand of this type: good and bad pain, stingy and thuddy sensation, edge and intensity, sub-space and Dom-space. These all communicate more to

players than the ordinary usage of these words would allow. However, their limitations, or the extent to which they put pressure on the chosen language, become apparent in speaking with people who knew the term intellectually before they had the experience it seeks to describe. In these situations, people speak of a kind of 'oh, so that's sub-space!' reaction. It is a recognition certainly, but one which includes surprise. The experience is not quite what was expected and, once the reality signified by the phrase is encountered, the overall understanding changes. When I asked about the meaning of 'sub-space', people who identified solely as Dominants prefaced their understanding with a qualification that of course they had never been there, suggesting that they felt they could not completely 'get it'. By contrast people who identified as bottoms frequently referenced my personal experiences of 'sub-space' as a basis for assuming a shared understanding.

Familiarity with the terms also impacts their usefulness. The term sub-space is in common usage. Although people may not discover the term until after they have had the experience it describes there are generally no problems connecting the two. By contrast the term 'Dom-space' is less common, and this affects its ability to describe experiences post-event, even for those with the somatic associations to draw on. Individuals who had not come across the term before had difficulty separating it from their associations with sub-space. They imagined a Top experiencing the same loss of self and types of altered sensations/perceptions that occur with sub-space, leading to the conclusion that there could not be such a thing as Dom-space – it would be impossible to achieve that and still be in control of your scene. These individuals described the qualities of their experiences in many of the same terms as those who used Dom-space, but that term did not offer an adequate shorthand for them because it was too similar to a term with radically different associations. By contrast, those who knew the term and connected it to their own experiences understood it as capturing qualities distinct from those of sub-space and found it as acceptable as any other shorthand term for a complex experience. Knowing the

term and defining it is one thing, having the somatic connections with that term to bring that intellectual understanding to life in the flesh is another. It is these shared elements in our unique personal worlds that allow us to “participate imaginatively in another person's world” (Muncey, 2010 p.11).

If my understanding of what my research participants say to me is rooted in my somatic memories of BDSM, then my interpretation and analysis of the material I collect is likewise connected to those experiences. By making this transparent, I hope to be able to reach more deeply into the material and create a coherent “storyteller's reality” (Etherington, 2004 p.112), one that synthesises my “tacit knowing, intuitions, images and felt-sense” with my collected material. It is clear that who I am, and have been and what I do, feel, know and live when I engage in BDSM play are far more intimately entwined with my experience of seeking and collecting material and the ways in which I interpret and understand it than I initially imagined that they would be. My own experiences, and the somatic memories I have of them, form such a foundational part of the framework through which I have approached my research that I could not bracket them if I tried. The challenge then is to use this in a way that “opens up a space between subjectivity and objectivity that allows for an exploration and representation of the more blurred genres of our experiences” (Etherington, 2004 p.37).

Analysis

In situating myself in relation to my research and the conceptual foundations which underpin it I have already touched on some of the factors which contributed to the process of analysis, but a few specifics need to be outlined.

I chose to understand BDSM broadly, and to include any individuals who classified their own activity as falling under this umbrella within my research. It was therefore important to be aware of contested terminology as a potential part of the way experiences

are framed (Henwood et al., 2008). My interview schedule strove to avoid importing a priori assumptions as to the meaning of relevant terms, and where a particular understanding was made clear it was used throughout the rest of the conversation. This meant a portion of my analysis needed to focus on the understanding of Scene-specific terms that participants shared with me.

The analysis was, in the main, thematic using my own transcriptions of the research conversations. My approach to this process was broadly in accord with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which seeks to engage with experience in its own terms. This approach is phenomenological in its focus on the question of what the experience of being human is like, which is explored in relation to specific examples via engagement with individual descriptions solicited from individuals engaged in lived processes (Smith et al., 2009) . This engagement recognises a “double hermeneutic” (Smith et al., 2009 p.3) at work: firstly, in the individual’s personal reflections on their experience which constitute the account they share with the researcher, and secondly in the researcher’s reflections on what the research participant has said. The process of analysis is thus one of trying to make sense of what each participant has to say, while recognising that in saying it they are trying to make sense of their own experience. Analytic themes emerge from the data in an iterative process which culminates in an account of how the researcher has understood what the participant has said.

IPA is resistant to attempts to pre-categorise or define experiences, and such it is a good fit for researching individual “religion-as-practiced” (McGuire, 2008a p.5) which may be more dynamic and flexible than official religion. It is often used to explore experiences identified as significant for and by the experiencer as it seeks to engage not only with descriptions of events but with the reflections of an individual as to the significance and/or meaning of their own experience. In this it is distinct from classic phenomenology, with its

focus on description of “pure experiencing” (Spickard, 2014 p.337). This divergence allows the researcher to avoid the subject-object dichotomy encouraged by classical phenomenology and instead to construct understanding through dialogic interaction between situated participants (Flood, 1999). In my usage of IPA methods I have sought to retain the recognition that an event identified by an individual as a meaningful experience is not a wholly interior thing, dependent only on a single subjectivity, but an active and relational performance. “Interior attitudes” are also “deeds that contribute to living life” (Harvey, 2013 p.206), and it is these contributions I have sought to understand through a dialogical encounter consisting of acts of speech which take place “in a language within a specific social, cultural and historical situation” (Flood, 1999 p.156). In classic phenomenological terms, I have bracketed out some matters that may interest other interpreters but which did not arise in my research conversations, and I have bracketed in (or emphasised) understandings that have arisen in those conversations.

Although some potential common strands had become evident during the interview process, and were reflected by some evolutions to the interview schedule, the initial process of reading and note-making was undertaken without deliberate consideration of those themes. Through the iterative process of reading and re-reading transcripts, and reflecting on the material they contained, various themes began to emerge more clearly. Some of these were in accord with earlier ideas I had identified, others were not. As each theme emerged I created it as a named node, using NVivo, so that subsequent readings of transcripts could be coded.⁷ Using NVivo in this way meant I could identify themes both within a single transcript and across all my collected material.

As each theme collected additional material I returned to the name I had given it, and to the substance of that theme, with the aim of clarifying what was important in these

⁷ NVivo qualitative data analysis Software; QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 10, 2012.

sections of text when related to the research as a whole. As a result, new nodes were identified and existing ones changed, rejected or absorbed into others. Some material within a transcript related to several themes and was coded accordingly. Once quotations had been collected under the relevant nodes it was possible to consider each theme in depth, and to relate them both to one another and to the research questions. Individual quotes were always examined in the context of the entire transcript prior to use in this text, to ensure that the material remains connected to its broader context and the material is not fractured. In this way I arrived at the set of themes which structure the chapters of this thesis: the experience of BDSM play in both the process of creating play-spaces and the qualities of experience within these spaces; BDSM as subcultural identity and the importance/role of this identity in individual lives; BDSM in relation to bodies and individual understandings of bodies; concepts of edges or limits and BDSM as the deliberate exploration of boundaries; and BDSM as a process of ritualising. The concept of gestalt functions as a spine to which all these different themes connect.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have set out the framework of ideas which gives a foundation to my understanding of the complex relationship between spoken language and corporeal lived experience. I have given an account of the practical implications of this foundation on my research and offered a summary look at the group of my research participants, to provide a background to the experience and reflections on which my analysis is based. The next chapter seeks to put some flesh on these bones with a selection of descriptions of kink play shared with me during my research conversations.

5 - What It Is That We Do: Experiential accounts of play

I have only two arms to hold you. Let my ropes be an extension of my form, let me wrap my love around you and keep you held in my arms longer and stronger than my own limbs ever could. As I hold this length of hemp line in my hand let me lock eyes with you as it passes from my will to yours, and brings us into a shared space, a sacred space, outside of our other worries. Let us dwell in each other's presence... In these times of pain and desperation I offer up this as a safe space to be the true you that you cannot show to the outside world.

– (Harrington, 2006 p.58)

For any real sense of what BDSM is to the people who engage it to be formed there must be a recognition BDSM is something real people really do, enjoy and value. Knowing all the possible meanings of every possible interpretation of the BDSM acronym does not give a tangible grasp of what actually takes place during BDSM activity. A full understanding of bondage means more than defining it; it means relating factual knowledge to the experience of being restricted, to the sensations and emotions that arise and are shaped by that experience or by the knowledge that one has taken so fundamental a freedom as the right and ability to move limbs from another person. It also means recognising that not all the activities covered by BDSM are equally enjoyable, exciting and powerful for every person who identifies with the term.

With this in mind I offer here a selection of accounts of BDSM from various research conversations, with the intention of giving a flavour of the realities which lie behind the definitions.

Nomad

I have a friend [who] runs probably the most interesting life drawing classes that you can imagine... So one of the evenings she ran was a shibari evening, we did several ties and I had two models that I was working with so we'd have one tied, they'd be drawing it and we just sort of sat watching, and then we'd start to prepare if there was anything we needed to do. So, I decided to do... a pentagram harness... The other model was tied up with her legs suspended. She had the most wonderful pair of stockings – the artists loved it because it had these intricate designs on and she had the longest legs, they were absolutely gorgeous... suspended up in the air all tied with ropes down them... looking superb! And so, I tied A*****, because it takes a bit of time to do the pentagram harness so I tied her up first. We were stood to one side, and as I was tying her and actually it was partly the bondage and I'd tied 'round the waist as well and between the legs, and then I just held her and she just went into this [pause] state of complete and utter submission and she just submitted into my arms. What I didn't realise is that because each bit was being timed so that they could fit everything into the evening... so everybody's finished drawing the current model and they were drawing us... the room just disappeared for us both, we were in this different consciousness [pause] the combination of the ropes and my strength in my arms and having that connection.

Esteban

If I get a piece of equipment or something like that I have to plan how I'm going to use it, because I haven't got somebody there to assist me. I bought... a leather arm binder, which is a great bit of kit but... fucking hard to get on by yourself! So, part of the appeal of that... is to think 'OK how can I get two straps over my shoulders when I've got two hands trapped inside the bag? And if I achieve that how am I going to get myself out of it as well?' So... you try different techniques and different methodologies and when you finally

manage to get it right you get a sense of satisfaction because you've worked through the problem... [And there's] a sense of excitement that once you've... managed to get it on then you've got that sense of excitement to realise you're actually [pause] ticked that box. And you've got that little bit of panic inside to think 'Can I get out of this? What happens if I can't get out of it?' So, you immediately get yourself out, just to reassure yourself. And then you put yourself back in it, to enjoy the experience of having your arms trapped behind your back... [Part of] the satisfaction I get from that is if I'm bound in certain positions then you naturally would want to struggle against the bindings which means that you're [pause]... It's a great way of locking yourself down into a situation where it's all-encompassing and you can't think about anything else because it's an uncomfortable position, so all that's on your mind is 'can I move slightly to make this slightly more comfortable?'

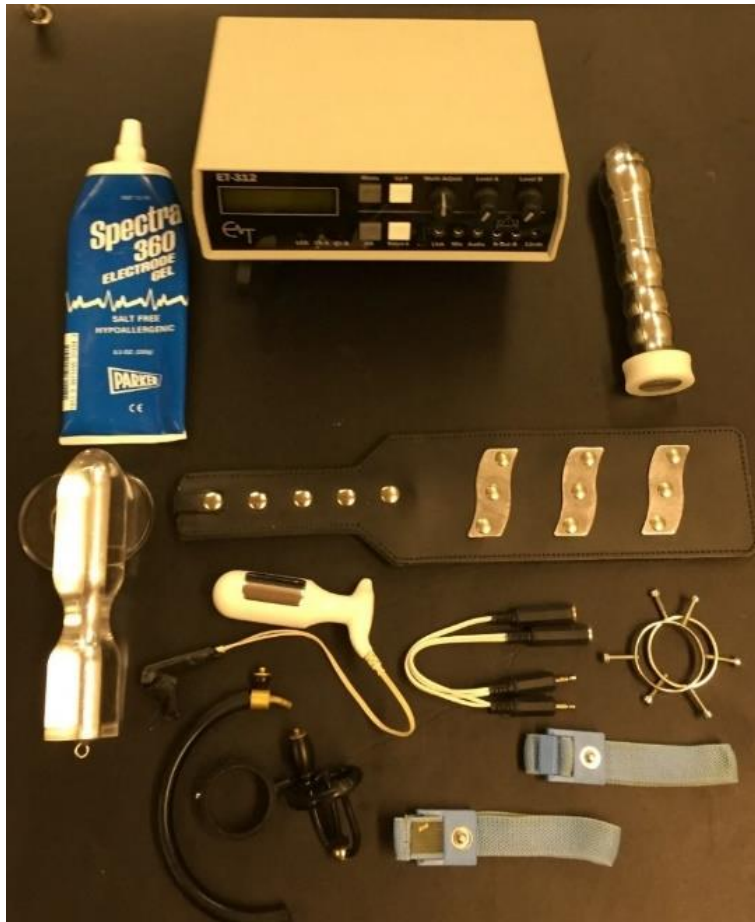
cate

He said 'I really want to give you wings', so we started doing the needles first [to hold the feathers] and [pause] I didn't sub-space till the very end, because it was so painful and I was oohing and ouching all over the place... I said what about a ribbon corset down the middle? So, we did that with staples... And it was then I spaced. It was like the adrenaline got so high, the endorphins got so high and then all of a sudden I just zonked. I kind of couldn't remember anything afterwards... [pause] I can vaguely remember a point with him saying to me 'I think we should stop'. Because I was finding it incredibly painful. And I said 'no, I want you to complete this. I want you to do this. I want you to finish this'. We were both at a point where, he could see how much pain I was in – and I was finding it for some reason incredibly painful where twice before I hadn't – it could be just because it was that day of the week, I've got no idea. But he was obviously at the point where he had had enough inflicting pain on me and he obviously felt that I had had enough of the pain.

But me being me, I was going 'no please I want you... don't stop, I want you to complete this.'

pussikin

We were well into the scene by this point, I mean I couldn't give you a blow-by-blow account but I'd been tied up in different ways and beaten with various things. But what sticks in my mind was [the] electro-play. It was only [pause] it was maybe the second or third time I'd done e-stim. And I was wired up... insertable electrodes in my pussy and up my bum and then... Master was using the remote control to give me shocks. Not touching me at all, he was on the other side of the room. Watching. And he was making them stronger every time... I don't remember what I had to do, or not do to get another one – he does this thing sometimes where he wants me to recite the alphabet, or count correctly. And when I get far enough down that's really hard to do... I think we were doing that, something like that. And if I got it wrong or hesitated I got another shock. I was pretty much broken. Crying and [pause] I couldn't even try to stop crying – that's hard for me, tears are hard. And it was at that point that he gives me the remote control and he told me to press the button myself, not for any reward, not for it all to stop or anything, just to please him. Just because he wanted me to do it to myself. It was the first time I realised how deeply I could submit, with the right person.



4: E-stim equipment

Griff

Let me tell you about a serial killer play scene I did with someone who wasn't expecting it. I knew she'd asked for wanting to be afraid and to be scared, but at some point in the future. So, I came in just to try out a new peg net. Like a net of clothes-pegs, like I think there was 300... Well, seven by twelve. That's not 300 [pause]. Anyway. So, the idea that I wanted to do is, I wanted to just see [pause] I had everything ready. I had tools ready. She was lying on the floor. Scared out of her wits. There was a moment where... I knew that the tears were real. There is a difference between crying because of somewhere you ended up and it's nice and it's strange and you're looking for the release and crying because you're fucking petrified. They are definitely different and if you don't know the difference you haven't seen it, ok. At one point she was, she's lying on the floor not

restrained in any way, ten feet away from the front door. Right. And I was, I had my back turned, I was quote in another room. I wasn't actually in another room but you know. She was convinced I was going to cut her up. She wouldn't safe-word, because she thought if I'm going to safe-word he's going to kill me. She also didn't get up and run out of the front door. She was ten feet away from the front door, literally ten feet. She didn't go anywhere... For lack of a better description I would consider myself to be a sadist, though it isn't necessarily pain... the physical act of causing pain that [pause] is the nail that hangs everything. Pain is useful because it is the response that I like... but you know, doing a sort of mental game with someone [pause] the serial killer thing [pause] when we started that scene, pegs notwithstanding, I didn't hurt her at all. All I did, I touched her maybe three times. It was all mental. It was all mental.

Kaz

I started running schools maybe 15 years ago now... With the Big School most of the people are looking for nothing but CP. But they don't want to go to a spanking party they want the whole picture, they want lessons, they want to be told off... But then gradually I got to know people that want a school, but they don't want a big school because they don't like the discipline. So that's how the pre-prep has come about. There's lots of people that want to play an age between 3 and 7 and feel nurtured and be able to still be at school, feel like they're at school but at a pre-prep. It's not a nursery, they have to be older. Although most of them are nappy-wearers and we do wet nappy changes but it's so clinical... There's no touching. It's purely clinical. We have a changing mat, they lay down, we take the nappy off, we clean them... and even cleaning them, the boys don't get aroused... I had to shout at two of the girls this weekend and the whole room just stopped because they're not used to me shouting, whereas at Big School, well! I wasn't sure I would enjoy the pre-prep. I thought... I'll do it because these people have nowhere to go. And the

thing that I get from whatever I do, whether it's mainstream BDSM or my schools, is that I'm giving something to someone else. And I can see the happiness and the calmness within those people and that's what I get out of it... I had some people that wanted something, that had absolutely nowhere else to go with what they wanted... what they wanted was to interact like a child would... So, I thought I would hate it: there's not physical punishments, I can't be nasty. But actually I've found something that I actually really enjoy. I would use the word love. It gives me another element to myself.

6 – The Play Experience (1): Making Play-Spaces

From the outside it may seem that I simply kneel before her, but kneeling has become my strength and standing was always hers. Neither would hold meaning without the other, and the magic would fade to nothingness without the fuel we both provide to the fires of our spirit.

– (tromble, 2010 p.20)

Binding your lover should not be a destination to be reached, but a journey to be enjoyed and savoured... Nothing else exists beyond the here and now. Even in a busy and noisy club all distraction drops away and I have frequently been unable to even say what music was playing, let alone answer somebody's question about what I thought of the DJ.

– (Argue, 2009 p.63)

The main criteria which I used to determine eligibility to participate in my research was some experience of doing BDSM. As with other important concepts, I let my participants tell me what they considered “doing BDSM” to be, and in this there was less variety of understanding than in other areas. BDSM can describe an entire relationship, shaped by a D/s dynamic, but when most people talked about doing BDSM they were separating it from the wider milieu of their relationship and using the word “play” as shorthand for talking about the times when they were engaged in overt BDSM activities. This chapter explores the process of engaging in BDSM play and the ways in which play-spaces are created.

Play has been described as the essence of humanity and the foundation of culture (Huizinga, 1950), as the “underlying, always-there continuum of experience” from which particular realities are “netted out” (Schechner, 1993 pp.42, 28) and also as being involved

in the origins of religion through its role in world creation, narrative construction and meaning-making (Cusack, 2013, Droogers, 2014). As Droogers defines it, play is “the human capacity to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality” (2014 p.8), and it is the ability to play that allows for the recognition of alternatives, and experimentation with them in realities of our own devising. Through the act of playing, individuals within a culture can create idiosyncratic versions of it, reject parts of it, and choose new vocabularies to express their choices in an unlimited process of meaning-making. BDSM is one among the many forms such play might take. It is more than a simple escape into fantasy since, as Kraemer observes, a person seeking BDSM play must be willing to risk social disapproval, criminal prosecution and loss of job or custody of children. She suggests that, in the absence of any obvious coercion or incapacity to understand risk and consequence, “such nonconformist behaviour is best read as an expression of personal autonomy” (Kraemer, 2014 p.37), and my research shows that many players do frame it in such terms. However, she also notes that it enables an “exhilarating exploration of... emotional and physical limits” creating “a kind of death-rebirth experience” (2014 pp.92, 99) that can change and re-orient people in the way that Droogers describes. My research also shows evidence of this kind of framing.

Talking About It

There isn't any other adequate name and it means that particular activity needs some sort of label. Like you hit a ball with a stick and you call it cricket. It needs a label. So, play is not adequate, but I can't think of anything adequate.

– Ben

You need a word, because otherwise you can't talk to people... If I were to say that play wasn't a good word your next question would

be 'what word is it then?' And I wouldn't be able to give you a better alternative at all.

– Griff

Play is an imperfect term, but even though it is recognised as such within the scene it remains the word of choice for most. It's meaning is certainly recognised, even when the term itself is disliked. It is widely used, as it offers a convenient means to talk in a general way about the about the activity(ies) of doing BDSM, as distinct from the abstract concept, or the structure of BDSM relationship. Play is used to speak of the occasions when any BDSM dynamic in a relationship is overt and explicit: when a kink identity is being performed, when the toys and tools are out and in use, and/or when intense and powerful experiences are being shaped. To single out play in this way is not intended to diminish the importance to individuals of their kink identity, but rather to distinguish the times when that identity is being fully performed from the times when it is less manifest.

When people speak of play and what it means to them, it is often identified as a term which counters stereotypical ideas about BDSM. Aey says that calling it play “brings in the lightness” which she finds in BDSM in a way other words would not; Kaz agrees that “I never see, in anything that I do, darkness”, and also feels that “the word play implies something good... I think because we're doing what we're doing, and not conforming to what we shouldn't be doing, I think we're actually quite liberated and maybe that's what makes us feel younger or happier”. Friedrich also connects the idea of play with freedom – “the freedom that children have in their expressions... they are free to do what they like” – while Mistress Marina observes that adults rarely play, meaning the word signals “something you choose to do rather than something you have to do”. The rarity of adult play was also noted by pussikin, who says “I don't think play is intrinsically trivial or

pointless or whatever... If it couldn't [be powerful] why would adults be so afraid of doing it?"

Griff observes that the term play "works on a number of levels... because play implies a certain level of communication and dance, almost". One of the levels he identified is enjoyment; he, and many other people, expressed the view that if their kink were not enjoyable they would not continue to do it. It is the prominence given to this element which leads Newmahr to conceptualise BDSM as a form of "serious leisure", meaning "a devotion to the pursuit of an activity that requires specialised skills and resources, and provides particular benefit" (2011b p.83). This is distinct from more casual leisure pursuits where anyone can achieve a gratification that is immediate, but short-lived. Most of my research participants would recognise their BDSM within this former description, but taking a religious studies perspective I find myself most interested in the "particular benefit" aspect; it is the nature of some of these particular benefits that makes BDSM more than just leisure (serious or otherwise). If benefit means 'the things we get out of kink' then exploring play, and the play experience, shows among those things the creation of new worlds, and particular kinds of experience which satisfy a human need for "bodily and collective ways of making meaning" (Grimes, 2002 p.3). It is more than just enjoyment, "there is definitely something in it over and above the ingredients" (Mistress Marina) because "it's the interaction of two like-minded souls, or two souls that are wanting to experience something on mutual ground, territory... it's not just spiritual. It's all the different layers." (Cee)

The Process of Play

I've got absolutely no doubt that you can't just bend someone over and whack them, you've got to know what they want, what's in their mind, how they want something to go... it annoys me when

people say 'oh, I don't know, just do something'. I'm a great believer in listening to what somebody wants. Although maybe they don't know...

– Colin

I remember the first time somebody ever spanked my ass and I remember turning around and smacking his face. And it wasn't that... I didn't want him to do that, but it triggers in me an immediate violent response. And so part of the pleasure is in fighting that and getting over it.

– Madeleine

The experience of play is complex, and the elements which go into creating a single scene are many and diverse. Any given scene might involve multiple people, the use of different toys, tools and settings, the interaction of these people and their awareness of one another. Given this complexity most 'how to' guides to BDSM emphasise that all play should begin with detailed negotiations, where potential play partners compare interests, set limits and agree parameters for play, including safe-words. This is good practice, enthusiastically endorsed by my research participants. However, most of the people with whom I conversed were engaged in committed relationships, at the stage where that kind of negotiation tends to be taken as read. Established couples do not generally embark on fresh negotiations every time they play; they are far more likely to discuss results afterwards or carry out periodic reviews of their agreed limits to reflect how their play has developed over time. This is an important indication of the nature of play – it is not a static thing, and this fluidity is true more broadly than a shifting of personal boundaries over time or a building up of tolerances to a particular sensation. The precise moments at which play begins or ends are rarely clear and, although we might speak of play in terms of 'a flogging scene' or 'a rope scene', that activity is often not the only one which the scene

involved. It is rather the focus or the peak of the scene, the part that is remembered most strongly.

Even when flogging would be the best category in which to put all the physical activity which took place, it is still inadequate as a complete description. A scene is not constructed simply by one person repeatedly striking another with a flogger. Aey describes it as “like a dance”, involving both a range of movements and interactions with a partner: “It's like a dance because with a flogger you can do it close; you can do it far away. So, you move all the way around. You go over, you go under. You step forward, you step back. And it actually is like a dance. And you watch him, and the music is there, and it's very physical and it's touchy and you can do so many different things. It's like a ballet. There are pirouettes and there are kneeling parts and it's a glorious dance, right, that you do together.”

There are different movements, different ways to wield a flogger and different angles to throw it from. There are different ways to combine flogging with other activities and the use of other toys – for example the use of a violet wand and appropriate accessories results in a flogger that creates electrical sparks on contact. There are different types of flogger (and most tops will use more than one during a scene) varying in weight, material, length and construction, and there are many different intentions on the part of both the Top and the bottom. For poppy, flogging her shoulders is “better than an aspirin” for a headache, while Twisted compared it to “a massage”. Sometimes the rhythm creates a trance-like state and sometimes it is about creating different kinds of sensation.

One expectation, drawn from internet image searches and the aforementioned ‘how to’ guides, might be that flogging is done on the upper back and shoulders or the buttocks. These are the safe zones where beginners would be advised to flog, because the chances of doing significant and lasting harm in these places is minimal. However, different

body parts create different sensations, and may be flogged if that sensation is an aim of the play. Flogging can also be used to create emotions or to disorient – for example a flogger striking a hooded head both creates fear and distorts the perception of any background noise. Different body parts, and different floggers, also mark the skin differently, and many people enjoy marks and play in certain ways to achieve them. Chests, thighs and legs, soles of the feet and genitals can all be flogged, and frequently are. Madeleine even described being “flogged on the face, with my eyes tight shut” as “one of the strangest, most emotionally powerful experiences I've ever had”.



5: A selection of floggers

Most people seem to agree with Twisted that the pain of flogging is “a nice pain” rather than one which must be struggled through, but some people disagree. This kind of perception may also vary with the type of flogger, the body part being flogged, the temperature of the room, the play that has gone before and so on. It is also possible for it not be classified as precisely painful at all – “for me that thud, real heavy flogging, that really deep heavy thud where you get that kind of deep bruise inside your muscles, that is my real pleasure-pain” (Molly). Flogging might also be used as a means of warming up the skin; some toys, such as canes or paddles, create less intense sensations on warmed skin,

so this is one way to explore limits in relation to impact play, or to experience the stingy sensation of these toys without being pushed beyond personal limits.

In short, what is subsequently described as ‘a flogging scene’ might have involved different areas of the body, different implements, physical or mental bondage, and other activities entirely. The description given simply means that it was the flogging that made the strongest impression once the play is finished.

Play and Lifestyle

Our kink it stands to now. Right here in this moment, even when we're just sitting together she's still mine... it's just what we do as part of our everyday life.

– Michael

It's always there. I'm always his sub, he is always my Dom... People go 'oh what happens if you disagree about politics, do you always have to give in?'. Absolutely not! We have heated discussions about those wider things, because as he's always said him being the Dom isn't about him just silencing me and getting me to be his minion... but it is there all the time. It may be very subtle, and certainly to outside eyes possibly even invisible, but it's there all the time.

– Molly

For those people who do not regard themselves as living a BDSM lifestyle, play is the term that indicates when you are engaged in BDSM as distinct from when you are not – “This isn't who I am *all* the time, and our relationship isn't this *all* the time. This is play” (Damien). However, for a lifestyle couple the question of play is more complex. Mistress Marina describes the relationship between herself and her sub as concerned with

“the power exchange, the way of being. That we are... on a day-to-day basis. We live BDSM, we don't do it”. This distinction between living and doing is important to understanding play. Play need not be an integral part of any power-exchange relationship: Mistress Marina lives in a 24/7 power exchange relationship but describes her sub as “not really a play-sub” and they have no sexual relationship. Although she enjoys both things she engages in them with other partners.

Other lifestyle relationships do incorporate play. For cate, who lives as a slave in a 24/7 relationship, play describes the times when she and her Master engage in the “bondage, and sadomasochism, and things that don't happen in the normal world”. The nature of their relationship means, that at the start of her relationship with her Master, a power exchange was agreed and this exists regardless of what they are each doing at any given moment. It is reflected in their play in the fact that she does not have a safe-word she can use to stop the play, but she does have a responsibility to tell him if “there's something wrong”. It is not only that she can tell him, but rather “I must tell him... Just because I can take whatever pain or whatever's happening, I might be able to take that but I've got cramp in my leg and I need him to be aware of that. Even though the cramp might go away by itself. He needs to be aware”, so that he can make the appropriate decision of “when enough is enough”. The power exchange between them is always present, in that he makes “decisions for me as to what he wants me to do and when”, and there are rules about how they conduct their relationship: “I have this main rule... that I will take any problem I have to him, without drama and give him time to find a solution”. None of this is play. Their play is distinct from both their everyday interactions and the discipline to which she consented as a part of their initial power exchange. She says “the way we conduct ourselves is different. You know punishment is very serious, and we're both in sort of serious frames of mind. There's no messing around, there's no fun, there's not, you know,

niceties as such. Whereas in play I can say to him 'oh, can I have the blindfold' or can we do this and can we do that. There's more fun."

Barry and poppy also both distinguished their play from the day-to-day flow of their life together. Barry feels that it is necessary to distinguish the doing of BDSM activities from the rest of a relationship, saying "I do have a difficulty with people who say that everything that they do falls under BDSM and that social context and personalities don't count. They're not living in the real world and I think they're a source of damage... It's not going to last, and it's not going to be healthy". His relationship with poppy is a D/s lifestyle relationship because "I am naturally dominant, and... I end up, if you like, being Master". Final decisions are his, except in matters relating to his health, but decisions are discussed before being made. For poppy "the edges become a little blurred... if Barry says something that I truly cannot agree with", but since her submission to him carries a requirement to always tell the truth she can "say 'but are you sure that that's right?' and if he still is, and I'm equally sure that I'm right, or that he's not right then... we'll discuss it further". She is clear that she is always submissive to Barry, it's just that sometimes they are having a row. Although, ultimately, he decides who has won their rows she is "happy about that because I've expressed my view. And if in the future it doesn't fit or something then I can put my hand on my hip and say 'well I told you so!'". She jokes that he is always right, even when he isn't. This is living D/s, but it is not constantly doing BDSM.

For all the lifestyle individuals with whom I spoke play describes, not only a physical enacting of the power exchange that is always present in their relationship, but in a sense it is performing the relationship itself. Molly described her play with Michael as making her "the canvas of our D/s relationship, where together we paint, draw, whatever word you give it. It comes to life on my skin". Play as an expression of relationship is also reflected in the effects of their play for Michael – "when you [Molly] and I play, I do get

turned on, you are aware that I get turned on, you like that I get turned on... It doesn't happen with other people. When I play with other people it has its own stimulation and it has its own rewards that are not that, and are not part of that". Discipline, where that is an element of agreed power exchange, is always clearly distinct from play in both the intention behind it and the experience created by it, but it is similarly the performing of an aspect of the relationship. For lifestyle couples, although they are always "doing BDSM" in the sense that they are always performing a power exchange, they are not always playing. It is perhaps analogous to a person living in a religious order who is always "doing religion" but is not always praying.

The Power of Play

I got this sort of freedom feeling. It was as if... I actually said at the time, I did some writing on it, and I felt like, I told my ex that I would fly. And I did. I mean obviously, the suspension everybody was like 'yeah, yeah, you know you literally did'. But you know, in my mind... in my mind it really freed me.

– cate

It's a cathartic experience. You come out at the end different to how you went in.

– Friedrich

The use of the term play to describe BDSM activity does not, and should not, signal that players regard their activity as nothing but a game or as in any way trivial – a concern some people express about the word. As Droogers observes, in the context of religion, there is no intrinsic opposition between playfulness and seriousness; playfulness allows us to consider possibility, and to react to things as-if they are so, even if we do not regard them as true, so that we "play the game seriously, but [we] understand that [we] are playing"

(2014 p.23). This is also the case with BDSM; the play is serious in that participants are fully aware of the nature of the activity they are engaged in (and of any risk), they invest time and effort into doing it well and the experiences they create in the doing are real, not fantasy.

This is important as BDSM is sometimes described as role-play, but for most of my participants this descriptor would be inappropriate. Their play does not require a plot-line or script and few of the people with whom I spoke regularly played in ways which involved adopting an alternate, pretend persona. The D/s relationship is real within the play-space, not invented or simulated. Although there are differences in personal approach and the requirements of different kinds of play, what most Tops described to me about their typical session is that it begins in a desire to do a particular thing, and as they do that and the bottom reacts to it the rest of the scene begins to evolve. This is not the process of physically creating or acting out a specific fantasy, but an evolutionary process of action, and reaction feeding upon one another. Early scenes between new partners, and experimentation by people new to the kink world, is more likely to begin with specific fantasy, and continued experimentation is dependent on how well particular fantasies about sensation translate into reality. Madeleine says it is “the most shocking thing in the world... to top someone who thinks they are going to enjoy it, and they've fantasised about it, and they've beaten off a thousand times to the idea of me laying something across their ass and then... it only takes one strike and you see their body go... They don't like it... And it achieves nothing”. But for most of the people with whom I spoke, kink had been established in their lives for some time and, for them, play is less about recreating a specific fantasy and more of a performance of the kink persona that is always present within them. Kaz was one of the few people I spoke to who engaged in play which could be described as role-play, in the form of school scenes. But, although she does feel that “I stop being Kaz, your friend. And I become Miss L, your teacher”, she also reflects that Miss L “is

there. She doesn't need to be made. She is just there... sometimes I haven't even got around to putting my gown on" – this is not a character which she puts on with a costume, but a part of herself that she draws on deliberately in some situations and which is quiescent in others. The play which takes place is not an attempt to recreate an actual school of any historical era, and the players are not precisely pretending to be characters within that setting. Such a scene draws on language, images, and meanings from a specific kind of situation, but without requiring a narrative to be acted out. The interactions within the scene are felt to be "spontaneous, pure, and authentic" (Newmahr, 2011b p.61), so that even a scene which is set in a fantasy scenario is experienced as an interpersonal encounter, rather than a performance piece. It is also important to be aware that the physical substance of the encounter is quite real, regardless of any possible fantasy context in which it may be enacted. A beating is a real thing, even if you stop it after the first blow you did actually feel that blow. As Madeleine puts it "the minute that the belt hits the ass is the minute somebody finds out what they really like".

Although it is commonly said that "the sub is always in charge" (Colin) the experience while doing BDSM is not so clear-cut. The lifestyle submissives with whom I spoke do not live in ignorance of the law of the land; they are aware that their exchange of power exists through mutual consent and that they could withdraw this. But it is important that it is an exchange from which both parties get what they need. The submissive has given the Dominant the power to decide for them, within whatever boundaries were agreed, and this occurs with the corresponding assumption that they will not arbitrarily withdraw that consent before communicating their needs and wants fully. Trust is thus a necessity on both sides. During my conversation with Griff I observed that, for me, an off-putting thing about playing with someone new "is having to go through that list of 'I like this, I don't like this. And I don't want you to do this' because one of the things I want is to feel I am actually submitting, so I don't want to have to give someone a list of what you can

and can't do" because that feels more like 'topping-from-the-bottom' than submission. But it is only possible to avoid this scripting of play once that mutual trust has been created, trust to the level poppy describes having with Barry, where if he "said 'I'm going to cut your hand off' I would actually hold my arm out. Because... he never would do anything that left me in any danger, he just wouldn't". Trust like this means that you can explore the things you may not feel you like, as well as the things you know you do, so that "playing is sort of danger with a safety net, because it's never going to be life threatening and it is never going to be more than I can take" (poppy). The submissive partner must trust that the Dominant will not abuse the power they have been given, but the Dominant must also trust that submissive will give them the information that they need to exercise that power well. While some lifestyle couples reject the concept of a safe-word as unnecessary, others like Molly and Michael, use it as "a tool of communication for both of us, because it allows... him or us together to explore my boundaries. Because he can push to those edges in the knowledge that when it becomes too far one way I am actually going to go 'oooh, we're right there now'" (Molly).

This same contract of trust exists within any play-space, although where the couple is not a lifestyle couple it exists for the duration of the scene rather than the relationship. A bottom trusts a top not to violate their agreed limits and to stop if a stop signal is given. The top trusts the bottom to communicate their experience as it unfolds. In other words, it is not only failing to respect a safe-word that constitutes a betrayal of trust, failure to use one if it is needed is also a betrayal. These mutual trusts enable both parties to enter safely into a world where one has real, tangible power over the other. There is a tension between the reality of the everyday, non-kink world (which not only makes people equal but also effectively prohibits that equality being given away) and the reality of the play-space, (where the bottom has relinquished some of those rights and entitlements). Weille thus describes play as happening in "a transitional space... [which] represents an intermediate

zone between internal and external, self and other... [It] involves the simultaneous recognition and suspension of the norms of reality" (2002 p.139).

For Buenting play has a dual dynamic suggestive of the function of transformative ritual; it both reflects its cultural context and enables the creation of alternatives (2003). Defining ritual as "the intentional practice of the dynamics of power" (2003 p.44) she notes that, if this is a useful definition, it would make the practice of BDSM a paradigmatic example of the concept. I agree that this is a useful addition to attempts to define BDSM and I also regard the concept of ritual as useful in understanding BDSM play. However, unlike Buenting, I prefer to consider ritual "in its own right" (Handelman, 2005 p.2). In this context that means considering what play is in relation to itself, including how it is organised within itself and how it is experienced by the players, rather than how it is "constituted through representations of the sociocultural surround that give it life" (Handelman, 2005 p.2).

Play-Spaces

When we first play, I am aware of others, but then we're so focused on each other, it's like we are in our own little world... regardless of our location, we get lost in each other.

– Ms Lucy

With somebody that I have a connection with it's almost like you're in this little bubble, and it's just you and them, and what's happening between you... There is something almost mystical about it at that point, because you can disappear to the outside, and it's just you.

– Mistress Marina

All BDSM play happens within a space that is both the physical area chosen for play and a different space, distinct from everyday reality, that is created by the play itself. Some

people have dedicated play-rooms in their homes, but most among my research participants do not. Even where they do have such a room, merely entering it does not constitute the creation of a play-space, although it may mark the beginning of the process of creating such a space. At parties or BDSM clubs, play partners usually take possession of a piece of furniture, such as a St. Andrews (X-shaped) cross or a spanking bench, and their play takes place on or around this, but the presence of such furniture does not make the play-space.



6: A spanking bench

The space in which successful play occurs is usually described in terms like ‘a different world’ or ‘a bubble’. This does not spring into being from the moment people decide to play together. It is “practiced into existence” (Lindquist, 2005 p.158) through the continuing loop of the actions of the top, performed upon the bottom and the reactions of the bottom in turn feeding the actions of the top: “You build it up. It's almost like a vortex. You're building it up as you're going along” (Mistress Marina). Aey says that this “doesn't

consciously happen... because you're so deeply focussed it tends to happen naturally”

while Cee suggests that it begins as a conscious process but changes as the feedback loop is formed so that “to start off, yes, I'm very conscious of what I am, what I'm doing. But as it goes on, if you're getting really good feedback with that person and you're connecting you are actually completely oblivious to what you're wearing, what you're doing.

Everything just seems to naturally flow... what we started off last night doing, and what we ended up doing were two completely different things, because I feed on that person.” This is not a mechanical process; it is not simply the act of flogging, or spanking or bondage which creates it. Ben illustrates this by observing “it's not like going to a prostitute where you get your thing done and then you get out. It's not about that... the whole concept is, for me the whole approach is different. It's about giving joy and receiving joy. The whole phrase here is giving and receiving.”

This giving and receiving is multi-directional, all players involved give and receive. Elements of what is given and received may differ, but there is also the simple fact that “he's doing this to give me pleasure as much as it gives him pleasure” (cate). This means that a scene can be understood “very much [as] give and take. In the sense that I enjoy giving somebody something else, I enjoy what they give in return” (Damien). If the reactions are not there for the top to read, with the bottom “literally laid there like a plank” (Damien), the top may well then be confused as to whether the bottom has got anything from the play, and unsure about what to do next. This communication is not purely verbal, but takes place “in the body” (Demon). “It's the eye contact, its body reaction, its breathing. It's completely focussing on that person. And I expect them to focus on me and what I'm saying” (Cee), but it is not just about the “wriggling around and squeaking” (cate). Ben explains it this way “BDSM is a relationship. Full stop. You are in a relationship with another person. And in order to enjoy, it's a bit like paella – the prawn, the chicken, the saffron, the cloves...each have to lose a little bit of themselves and absorb

a little bit of the others and so it makes it a fantastic dish. So, if you think of a relationship as a paella or a pilaf or whatever...not only mixing ingredients together, each ingredient willingly loses a bit of themselves and gains the other.”

All participants need to understand this to make the connection that the play-space draws on. It is made “absolutely together, unequivocally. Regardless of the roles being taken” (Griff). Mistress Marina agrees that “the two of you need to make it together. I think if you've got someone with you that's not reading off the same page you can't go there” and pussikin suggests that the top and bottom form two parts of a whole “like a hook and eye, I've got one part, and it either fits with a partner or it doesn't”. She suggests that without both parts “you can have kinky sex but you can't have BDSM”, echoing the distinction between doing and being suggested by Newmahr – “people who do SM engage in it as a means to a (sexual) end. People who ‘love SM’, by comparison, view SM as an end in and of itself” (2010b p.329).

Such a distinction between doing and being is not absolute, but most of my research participants described play without the connection between players as being mechanistic. For example, Rocks says “I have done scenes with someone I didn't really have a connection with and I've made a reasonably competent job of it but... it did feel quite mechanical”. Michael explained that he does sometimes play with people other than Molly, but he calls this being a “stunt arm” as opposed to the Dom that he is with her: “While I'm stunt-arming that loop doesn't exist... It's far more technical. I'm still aware, I'm still connected, and I'm still paying attention. I'm still doing those things but I am removed. I am not in that moment of that situation in the same way [pause] that I am when we do our thing”. Similarly, Piers observed that if he just wants to practice his technique “I'll use an inanimate object”, because playing with the focus solely on himself is a waste that “makes the person being struck completely meaningless, and they're not”.

Most of the people with whom I spoke had had experiences where things just did not work. The description cate gave is typical: "I just wasn't comfortable I think... we played for a little while. Very nice person. But I just got funny vibes from it. I couldn't fully relax and so I just had to stop... [the bubble] just wasn't there for me. I was doing it because I could... I could do it if I wanted too and I was doing it because I could and I thought I would try it because I'd never actually played without the relationship before, so I thought I would try it to see what it was like and it did absolutely nothing for me, basically". The connection is more than trust, although the importance of trust was a common observation. But for play to create this other world seems to require something "more than just trust, it's also about bonding that occurs. When you can bond that deeply with someone... And the bonding occurs as a process. It doesn't just happen at any one point; it's something that takes place over time" (Javelin). Mistress Marina likens this play connection to sexual chemistry and the analogy is successful in that it calls to mind the idea of a hard to explain 'spark' and the impossibility of creating this spark if there is nothing to build on.

Even where the spark existed to begin with it can be broken, or the play can reach a level of intensity beyond which one of the players is not willing to go. This sort of damage can signal the end of a play relationship, although it does not have to. Aey explained how an unintentional breach of trust meant that she and her husband no longer play together: "My husband, he was actually my play partner at the beginning. And what happened, he has this real thing about electricity. And I had the violet wand and I was, as I do, I was threatening to touch his penis with it, right. Which I didn't. But he had a tiny drop of pre-cum come down. And the little thread was there, right, and he got a shock... And that trust was gone... That was it. End of. Never wanted to do anything else". However, with her current submissive "there have been occasions when his trust has been betrayed but he has always known that it is unintentional" and so the bond required for successful play

remains intact. Colin described the discovery, towards the end of his marriage, that his wife had explored kink as much as she ever wished to do: “There was a night that I will never, ever forget, when she sat on the side of the bed pulling on some stockings and she said ‘God, I hate doing this’”. This discovery meant that “that was it. It was finished, gone... And then there is the rest of our marriage, where I was playing more and more and more elsewhere, to find what I wanted.”



7: A Violet wand and attachments

The existence of the play space is not just about the practice, but about the relationship being enacted in that space. Play both creates and requires a bond between the players, so that as people play together more often they can also play more intensely and enter into their shared world more completely. The process of forming the play-space

is initiated by the actions of the top performed upon the bottom; the bottom is the heart of the space; the connection and interactions of the players form and maintain the space, and the edges of it are held/defined by the top. And so, the world is changed, and a new space is created within which powerful experiences can occur.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined how the act and process of playing brings into existence, shapes and sustains a space which is experienced as a different world by the people within it. This world is dependent on the successful relationship between the players, manifested through a multi-directional loop of action and reaction, trust and communication. The construction and expression of relationship, and the intimacy and trust enacted during play contribute to the sense of BDSM as gestalt. The nature of the world in which this occurs, including qualities of experience within the play-space, are the substance of the next chapter.

7 – The Play Experience (2): Inside Play-Spaces

What I do see in these moments are fleeting and nondescript defiantly nonverbal expressions of the spirit within the flesh. I sense the spirit riding the razor's edge of release. The silent cry for catharsis, not the clinical meaning, but the purely animalistic-human need to let something go that the rational (funny that) brain holds dearly to.

– (Master Dennis, 2010 p.29)

We are like Inana who walked willingly into the realm of Death, who was stripped of her name and her power, who was hung on a hook over the throne of the Queen of Death... She did it because there was no other way to touch the deep wisdom she sought, no way but to stumble along dark paths to the katabasis point, and trust in all the wisdom of the Underworld that you may one day emerge triumphant.

– (Kaldera, 2006 p.7)

In considering the creation of play-spaces we have seen how they are created through a process of action and reaction, and the forging of an interpersonal connection. As this process unfolds, it shapes an ambiguous space commensurate with that which Taves describes as the space of “adult ritual play”, a space between “the subjectivity of the self and the objectivity of the other” (2009 p.159). The concern of this chapter is to consider the experiences which take place within that space.

These experiences do not appear fully formed out of nowhere, nor do they create themselves. They are created deliberately through the process of play. Schechner suggests that it is not the abstract concept of play which should be of greatest interest but the act of playing, because playing is the “ground, the matrix, birthing all experience's... multiple realities” (1993 p.28), which people simultaneously create, stand within and stand upon.

Working along similar lines, Plate distinguishes open-ended and unstructured play from the playing of games. He says that “play provides an active, potentially destabilising, disorienting, and transgressive force, while a game provides rules, and establishes order through the creation of boundaries within which play occurs” (2010 p.216). For Plate, religion exists in the interaction between the two. BDSM experiences are created in the same way, with the negotiation of limits and the connection of trust constituting the boundaries within which the transgressive force of the play can take shape. In this framing, play becomes an “intimate ritual” outside the formal structures of organised religion but, nonetheless, enabling a person to remake themselves and “presenting the result of this remaking to others” (Nagy, 2005 pp.120, 128).

Experiencing Play

I think that even naming things, so like cutting or caning or needle-play, or blood-play or flogging or whatever your thing is... the naming is somehow limiting them to this action that happens, to the event, the physical event. Unfortunately, those labels don't encompass... the huge iceberg under the surface that's really what's at play in the experience.

– Madeleine

I wouldn't want somebody to indulge in something, or have me do something to them, that I haven't experienced myself. Because how can I sit there and really understand what they're experiencing if I haven't experienced it myself?

– Damien

Experience is inherently a problematic concept given that we are all within a constant flow of experience. Although it is often taken for granted that experience is an

inner event of total subjectivity, this perspective is a construction of the modern West (Desjarlis, 2012), and a contentious one, as experience is a potent and ambiguous concept. When a person designates a particular happening as 'An Experience' this appears to mean an occasion when the normal flow of experiencing has been somehow disrupted so that attention becomes focussed on particular elements drawn from the continual, multiplex flow that is the experience of living. For researchers, access to these experiences is primarily through the subjective accounts of the experiencer and this raises questions about how such accounts are structured and created. Recognising that people are bodily beings implies that an experience of a physical practice must combine and incorporate a range of processes – sensory, organic, unconscious and cognitive. Siting those bodies within contexts means that these processes are informed and shaped by culture, language, social context and relationship. How all this feeds into an offered description will be further affected by the way in which the memory was stored, how the conversation awakens it, how many times the experience has been reflected on prior to giving that description, and so on.

As I discussed experiences of BDSM with my research participants, it became clear that occasions of BDSM play are examples of the bubbles of Experience that can occur within the constant stream of experiencing. A lifestyle D/s dynamic and personal BDSM identity are among the many flows which feed that stream. In talking about play experience I am considering what it is like to be within that specific bubble – a different world that is created by the play – and asking whether and how that world differs from the quotidian one.

The play-space is a lived space, created by action, interaction and multi-directional communication. Lived space combines perceived space with conceived space. But is more than merely the sum of these two. The perceived is physical space, "materialised, socially

produced, empirical...directly sensible and open, within limits, to accurate measurement and description”; the conceived space is mental, and concerned with “language, discourse, texts, *logos*” (Soja, 1996 pp.66, 67). Lived space encompasses both, but is distinct from them. It is the space of inhabitants and users, which Soja designates as Thirdspace. The space where the real (material) and the imagined (cognitive) combine in equal terms to make “lived spaces of representation”, that are “simultaneously real and imagined and more (both and also...) real-and-imagined (or perhaps realandimagined?) places” (1996 pp.68, p.11). To approach lived spaces from a Thirdspace perspective means recognising the different subjectivities of the people describing their spaces, rather than imposing predetermined frames. Uncertainty and openness to contestation arise from that and must be accepted. Exploration in this way requires guidance, in the same way that exploration of the physical world of Firstspace is guided by its “readable texts and contexts”, and the Secondspace of cognition through its “prevailing representational discourses”. An exploration of real-and-imagined Thirdspace must be guided “by some form of potentially emancipatory *praxis*, the translation of knowledge into action” (1996 p.22).

Being in Another World

I stroke his face, knowing his body and mind are still humming with the vibrations. I'm glad I could do that for him. Perhaps we are not in the same 'place', but we danced the same dance together.

– Aey

It's the eye contact, its body reaction, breathing. It's completely focussing on that person. I expect them to focus on me and what I'm saying. And it's an energy and you can feel that energy, and you can feel it coming off someone. You can feel... sort of like a

chemical reaction in yourself. Charging up, charging up, charging up. And then you just ride on it.

– Cee

Beckmann identified a list of features as characteristic of “transcendental states” (2009 p.200) achieved through BDSM. These features include difficulty explaining an experience in words, changes in the way the body is perceived or reacts, a loss or change to the sense of time, and a different quality of memory. She used them to create a questionnaire about experiences she had pre-determined were exceptional. My research indicates that most of the features she identified are aspects of any successful play, although they may vary in degree, as play varies in intensity. As Friedrich summarises, the play-space is characterised by the fact that “it feels different. It feels completely different to the normal every day way of thinking and talking and that”. The qualities ascribed to ‘there’ and ‘here’ differed between individuals, but the generalities identified by Beckmann were commonly referenced across my research conversations.

The most common description my participants gave for a play-space was in terms of different worlds or bubbles of different reality. This was often employed as a means of emphasising just how different (and how difficult to describe) the experience could be, as well as to share ideas about the potential transformative power of such spaces. Cee describes the play-space variously as “another dimension”, “a magic space” and “a completely different world”, with going there likened to “going through a keyhole”. For Ben, it is “an environment where nothing else exists, just the Dom and you and everything else blurs out”, and Damien agrees that “the here and now sort of disappears off” and only the play-space matters. Damien uses the phrase “the here and now” to refer to the quotidian world. In contrast Javelin uses the same phrase to explain what it is like within the alternative world of the play-space, saying “when I’m into a scene really deep, whether

Dom or sub, I'm so totally in the here and now... I'm achieving what Buddhist monks spent years trying to achieve. I'm in the here and now, I'm focused, time tends to be gone... I'm just in the moment".

The experience as a whole is challenging to capture, but a few people tried to explain the quality of it. Damien describes it in terms of rightness, and things being as they should be – "Think about a nice day, when it's sunny. And you're out walking, and it's just, everything is pleasant. The birds are singing. It's not too bright, not too dark. Everything just flows. And it's like that. And that's what I like about it. It's like when you're driving home from somewhere and the journey just goes, there's no traffic or anything like that. It just flows. And it's that, it's that sensation. Everything feels right.... Everything is as it should be. It just fits". The idea of flow was also part of Oliver's description, comparing BDSM to wreck-diving. He says that he thought kink would take the place of rugby in his life, as a vent for frustrations, but instead he discovered that "it really mellows me out. So, it's [more like diving] because you have to be mellow when you dive. If you panic you're dead, and pretty much everything that you do to stay alive under water is the opposite of what you would do on the surface... And that's all about a flow state... I get into that zone". Marie also made a comparison with extreme sports, observing "that the sort of endorphin rush that you get... at some point when you're involved in spanking activities... it has occurred to me recently that it's quite similar to the adrenaline rush that you get when you're jumping off a waterfall". For Aey the preferred analogy is music, both the playing of it and the listening to it; while it is clear that she is the musician her partner is sometimes the instrument that she plays, and sometimes the listener absorbed and carried away in her music. She says she thinks of topping "like playing a piano. Because you're playing you pay more attention to what notes you play, whereas if you're not playing you can listen to the music and get lost in it. [When you're playing it] you can still feel it... and you can still get involved in it. But you're doing it, so you stay".

Different Experiences in Shared Space

The best scenes are always where your personalities merge for a while. It's only you, your bottom, and the rest of the world is gone. And the really good scenes that time element disappears too. So, the better the scene, the more connected you are, the more those two personalities do merge because you're connected in a lot more ways.

– Stoney-face

It feels so comfortable being in the space when you're with somebody who just knows exactly what's going on with you, [and] it doesn't scare them...

– Madeleine

Beckmann (2009) concludes that the transcendental states she has identified are available primarily to bottoms; a conclusion that is not surprising given that her questionnaire is framed in terms more appropriate to the bottom experience than the top. The experiences are different, because the people having them are doing extremely different things, but both top and bottom are involved in the creation of the play-space and both are present in the different world so created. The space is centred upon, or formed around, the person taking the bottom role. As a result, the bottom is less likely to be aware of the edges of the space, or of other people trespassing into it, than the top. They are also more likely to lose their sense of self, or to experience a blurring of sensations that are normally distinct. Penny says, "I kind of get lost in the scene", and her perceptions change so that "I'm not always aware of how I'm feeling". Ivy says that "time passing especially [goes away] ... but also any kind of awareness of my image and environment and all that kind of thing, becomes very small". Similarly, poppy also loses any awareness of her wider environment, saying that "even when it's very noisy around us I

only actually hear Barry's voice. I'll sometimes hear a buzz, but it is just a buzz, you know it could be somebody using a drill or somebody talking. I can't differentiate". Bea described a distortion of normal perceptions, saying "I'm a really cold person, I'm always cold. But I never feel cold when I'm there". Sometimes this change is more dramatic than other times as she recalls "there was one time when I was on the bed, and I grabbed hold of the duvet because I was floating away". Up and down can also become confused for poppy: "He took me off the [rope] spider's web, and I was convinced that the floor was actually the wall and that Barry was going to fall off it! So, I don't always know what way is up. He sat me on a chair and I immediately fell off of it". But the bottom is aware of their top and of the connection that is being made and remade between them, as Bea puts it "at that point he is my world. I am completely reliant on him. There is nothing in the world apart from him."

In sum, a person who has taken the bottom role is more likely to describe an experience which fits with Beckmann's understanding of transcendental states. For the bottom to achieve this degree of immersion, the top needs to function almost as an anchor, to keep them safe, and to help them return to the quotidian world. Griff described it in exactly these terms when he told me about an intense "serial killer" scene he had done, saying "I took her somewhere, and I had to carry her out but I also had to remember how to get there". This does not mean that there is no alteration in reality for the person in the top role, but it is necessarily of a different kind. The top gains a heightened awareness of the things which happen within their play-space, and of potential risks or disruptions to that bubble. Demon describes this simply as paying "more attention to things than I would do normally. Well you have to, because you're fucking around with a speed-of-sound piece of leather aren't you?".

Michael gave a more detailed description:

When you're topping you have to be hyper-aware of the other person. Even when you've negotiated everything with safe-words, and OK you're gagged so you can have this thing to drop or whatever it is you're going to do. Even beyond that... that's not enough... it is merely one of the tools. And your awareness of what their body is doing, what their body is telling you. Even without words the body language of that is really important. So, if you're not able to empathise and be in touch and really be part of what is going on, on that really deep level, you're going to miss that and you're going to make a mistake.

Griff agrees that as a top “you need to be aware of everything that is in the scene. And if you're in a room everything that is in the room is in the scene”, resulting in a hyperawareness of everything happening within that space. He describes this level of attention as “black light”, in the sense that “it only shows certain things, things that are important or [pause]. Anything that moves in the room whilst I'm doing stuff, that moves without me moving it, immediately has my attention”. This is coupled with, or perhaps extended by, a similar hyperawareness of the bottom and their reactions.

As Michael explains, the top cannot lose a sense of themselves or their surrounding in the same way a bottom might, “because I have to be aware of so many things it's very difficult and maybe not good for me to lose myself completely in that moment.” Michael is responsible for Molly and so he cannot go “ultra-spacey”, but neither does he remain outside the world of the play-space – “there is this kind of being in the zone, a sort of thing that's difficult to describe. While I am in the zone, part of being in it seems to be some sort of extension of being aware. While I am kind of lost in this moment a part of being lost in this moment is being really aware of what is happening.” Damien described a similar combination of lost and heightened awareness, using a candle as an

analogy – “It's kind of...if you stare at a candle in a dimly lit room you become aware of everything darkening down, and it's just the light of the candle. That's all, everything else will dim. And there's an essence of that, the room may disappear, background noise can fade away”.

For some tops, play in a public setting is less immersive because of the need to be aware of other people who might trespass into the play-space or do something unpredictable. It is generally understood to be bad manners to get too close to someone else's play-space but, as poppy experienced, it can happen: “We were using a cross, a St. Andrews. And somebody actually leant on it. And it moved. And that was scary, because suddenly I didn't know what was happening, and I actually thought the cross was falling. And I didn't know which way was up any more, and I actually did think it was falling down. So, I was screaming. Barry was trying to look after me and tell the chap who was causing the problem to remove himself, politely”. However, for other tops, any other people in the room are something else that disappears. Mistress Marina says “you're in this little bubble... And all the other people, the periphery of a club and whatever else is going on sort of disappears into the background and it's just you”. By contrast Demon enjoys playing in public because “I'm showing off... I do like showing off... So I show off to myself, I show off to them, I like to show skill”. He still felt play created a bubble, but knowing people were watching him enhanced his enjoyment of being inside it. Tops generally agreed that even if they might not be aware of people outside their play-space they would know if someone wandered into it.

The presence of others can be a matter of indifference to a bottom. Alternatively, it might enhance their experience: Molly describes herself as an exhibitionist, a voyeur and “a self-voyeur... so if there's a mirror, if I can watch myself being, well, that's a huge thing for me”. But she also says that sometimes “if there are other people on other bits of

equipment then often I will just close my eyes and shut that off because I want to be in that place, I want to be in my body and my moment". By contrast, cate said that if she becomes aware of other people in their play-space then the space is broken, "the head-space it just clears. It did happen last weekend; we were playing in what was supposed to be a couples' room and these single guys – the wanky-men – came in and immediately [pause] my eyes opened and I knew exactly where I was and it [pause]. We came home". There are also people who enjoy playing with the tension between wanting and not wanting to be watched, a mental state I have always described in relation to myself as being "a shy exhibitionist". Ivy used this same phrase in explaining how she enjoys "being watched" if she feels safe, and assured that there is no-one there "that might have a different, a very, very different mind-set"; in a setting where she can relax, being watched is "a good thing and that, because I'm stubborn, does things like raising my pain threshold".

Interestingly, the area where there was the greatest similarity between tops descriptions of their experience of the play-space and bottoms descriptions of theirs is in the relationship with time. It is, regardless of role, something that most people lose completely. Damien, a top, says that "what feels like five minutes could be an hour and vice versa, what feels like an hour could be five minutes" and Bea, a bottom, similarly says "I have no idea of the time. It could be ten seconds; it could be ten hours. I don't care". For poppy, temporal awareness extends to knowing that Barry always takes his time. She says that "we can't do a quick half an hour, it's usually, you know, three or four hours", but she is not conscious of this time passing, and it takes her a while to get a sense of time back again – "I'm never aware of it. It takes me the rest of the day, if there is any rest of the day, to work out why it is that the meal I was going to cook for tea can't happen anymore. He will say 'but there is no more time, open a tin of soup'. And I'm going 'but why?'" It may seem surprising that tops often lose a sense of time, given that they become so much more

aware in other ways, but it does seem to be common. Barry explicitly distinguished awareness of time and space saying that he is always “very conscious of the space that I'm in, less conscious of time – that goes sort of into semi-suspense”. I quote Griff's description at length, as he explains how he understands the interaction of a hyperawareness of the play-space and the loss of a sense of passing:

This is the thing. I think it's the difference between what actually happens and how I perceive it to be. When I'm fully focussed in [pause] in my head... it takes hours. Absolutely hours, and I think that is because I'm fully focussed in and my brain is taking in all the information super-fast. It's just coming in coming in coming in coming in and you're not filtering, at all. Whereas if you're not as focussed or when you're moving things around or actually you're not focussed on how to make this person really, really, feel really humiliated, in fact you're thinking about 'hang on, did I have two chairs or three?' right, that thing. Then time changes again... it's an interesting thing to think about, because I don't actually think about time. I like to take my time... It's *my* time. Yeah, so I don't know... it could feel like a really slow long scene and in fact it was twenty minutes whereas there are certain things that feel like they've been, that was like just a thing, and it's actually been an hour and a half.

The difference between the space for a top and the space for a bottom is illuminated by people who are happy in either role. As a switch, Digi was able to describe both sides of his play with Twisted: “I don't think about what she's hitting me with at all. There's just the connection between us... I don't think 'oh she's hitting me with so-and-so now'. It's just, you're lying in the space, and what's happening is happening. And you just let it wash over you... But if I'm topping I'm very, very conscious of what I'm doing and I'm

very aware of, trying to get [hit] the whole of her back rather than just one spot.” Rocks suggests that switches have an advantage when they top, because “how can you do something like that, particularly when it involves a pain toy, how can you use that carefully and responsibly if you don't know how it feels to be on the receiving end?... I'd rather they said they've tried it and didn't like it than that they've never tried it at all”. But he is clear that the two experiences are different: bottoming creates “sensation overload really, of various different sensations”; whereas, when he is topping “I am concentrating on her and whatever part of her I am playing with at the time. If there's two of us it might be that I'm clawing or kneading on her bottom and someone else is maybe scratching her shoulders, but it's yes, I'm doing this here but I know about what's going on there...all of her is the focus”.

Connecting

[It] falls back to the 'do you care about the responsibility?' If someone is going to offer you that, you've got to take care of it. Someone gives you a diamond ring you have it insured, don't you? And you don't wear it in the garden, do you? You take care of it... it's precious. It's a precious thing.

– Aey

I feel safe, I feel protected. I feel, no matter what he's doing, he's there, he's watching over me. I feel wanted and very much loved.

– cate

In the play-space people become aware of one another in new ways and they create, recreate and explore relationship. Friedrich, like many people, finds this the most significant aspect of engaging in play. He says “it is really important to me. I feel like there's almost like... I don't know how to describe it. But people, I firmly believe people have got

souls. I'm not religious person but I firmly believe that people have got souls and I believe that people, humans, are the only creatures on this planet that are truly capable of expression. And this is a form of expression between two people." Griff compares the experience with meditation, observing that "the thing is that with meditation, you're closing off your world. You're shutting out all the things that aren't important... you're shutting out everything except yourself. Whereas if there is two of you shutting out everything that is not important you're shutting out everything except you and the other person. You're almost opening yourself up to them... So that connection becomes a lot stronger".

This connection is emphasised in the period after play has finished, which is usually seen as a period of transition between the worlds. Both tops and bottoms usually need time to come back, and to enjoy the sensations and connections that they have made. For Bea, the aftermath is a time when she feels "at that point there is a lot more closeness, a different degree of it. So, I'm a lot more huggy, and wanting to be with you [Dee]... I just kind of cling on". Michael described the aftermath of play in both physical and emotional terms: "the after for me is twofold. There is a sense of release, isn't exactly the right word. Of the ache of your muscles from having used them, and the pleasure of having taken you [Molly] to a place that you've enjoyed and liked, and the joy of the cry-laughing, and the other things, and just the sheer pleasure and joy of it all afterwards. There's this really lovely glow. I don't know the word that quite encapsulates it; there isn't one that just wraps it all up".

For Stoney-face, both play and its aftermath relate to the exchange of energy between people. He says "in a scene your goal is to have your partner feel your energy, you feel your partner's energy, and your energy merges. And you play in that merged energy for a while, and do whatever you need to with it and then, after your scene ends,

you sort of separate your energies again in the aftercare, and whatever you need for aftercare and then you kind of go your separate ways... knowing that two humans have used the energies they create and connected with in a scene to play with that back and forth, and it feels great. It's amazing”.

Rocks agrees that the aftermath is a time to bask in where you have been and where you may have taken someone else, saying “I like the intensity of connection it brings. That's the driver for it. Yes, in the short term, when you play a scene it'll be pulling energy off your partner and giving it back in various forms, and yes I enjoy the dynamic there. But it's the cuddle afterwards, it's the connection you get as a result of that”. He also felt that the contrast between who you were while in the play-space and the person you are in the everyday world was an important part of play, and reflecting on that afterwards was part of the enjoyment. He said that “you have pushed into dark places and you have come back again and, yes, you can be this nasty person but you're not. You don't have to be. You can unleash the beast and you can put it back in the bottle again... It's the dark side, it's the forbidden side. We're all brought up to be nice people; you aren't supposed to hit people. And here is somebody who has not merely given you explicit permission to hit them; they're getting off on it!”

Spacing

Are there actually experiences that we have as humans that are beyond our ability [to describe]? I think that sub-space is one of those, and it doesn't matter how much you describe it or the words that you use. I'm not sure you can ever give it language to make it truly understandable to somebody who hasn't experienced it in their own way.

– Molly

When I get really deep into an intense scene there'll be times when all of a sudden I'm looking down on the scene. But I'm still also partly in my body... I'm seeing it from a kind of floating area above the scene. And seeing it from my body too.

– Javelin

'Experience' has been an important concept within religious studies and the body of work found under the heading 'religious experience' is large, often with little attempt made to distinguish the different forms that experience might take (Sharf, 1998). However the main interest seems to be with a special kind of awareness, "white hot" (Taylor, 2003 p.29) experiences of special or altered consciousness, which are often presented as being fundamentally ineffable. The potential for BDSM to create forms of experience which might fit this particular understanding was used in Taylor and Ussher's (2001) study, identified as one of the categories through which some practitioners might understand their practice. They called this category "transcendence", defined as BDSM which is explicitly placed "within a spiritual or mystical framework", or which is associated with experiences of a "heightened state of consciousness, or as in some way making them more astute, more enlightened or more alive" (2001 p.305). The concept of mysticism, largely in Christian forms, similarly informed Beckmann's (2009) aforementioned transcendental states questionnaire.

I have shown that at least some of the elements associated with this kind of religious experience are present in any successful BDSM play, but even if most play has elements of transcendence there are also white hot BDSM experiences, which stand out from the broader milieu of play in the same way a mystical encounter with divinity might be said to stand apart from prayer or religious worship. It is hard to draw a line around such an occurrence, or say precisely where they begin and end; but it is certainly the case that, within the different worlds, different levels of immersion and absorption are possible.

This is usually talked about in terms of greater or lesser intensity, which can reach a peak that is known as 'sub-space', 'Dom-space' or just as 'spacing'. These terms are understood in different ways, but they are more likely to be labelled by practitioners as altered consciousness than the general experience of play. For this reason I believe it to be these peaks of intensity that Beckmann's research participants are largely describing in response to her questionnaire – in particular the questions asking about “illusions or hallucinations during a 'scene'-Experience” and feeling that “these experience happened to you without your actual influence” (2009 pp.213, 214). This impression is reinforced by my earlier observation, that the experiences in which she is interested seem more accessible to those taking the bottom role, since sub-space is far more commonly discussed and universally understood within the Scene than Dom-space. It is surprising that none of her research participants appear to have offered her either term in their descriptions; she explicitly says that there is “a lack of words to adequately express experiences formerly unnoticed, unnamed and therefore perhaps unreflected upon” (2009 p.200). By contrast I found no-one who was unfamiliar with the term sub-space before I mentioned it, and it frequently emerged in conversations before I raised it.

Sub-Space

It's very difficult to explain... it's like the world isn't there anymore, it's like this big cloud, and I'm in the middle of it.

– poppy

When I'm in that state... I don't really feel anything, to be truthful. I've got no thoughts at that point. I've gone. If I'm taken far enough everything around me is gone... I mean I've heard people talk about this when they float above themselves. I'm not floating above myself, I am within my own body. And I'm enjoying whatever

pleasures, pain that's being inflicted but I'm not aware of anything else. It's just whatever is happening to me at that time.

– Kaz

For all its ubiquity, sub-space remains a problematic term. Some people refer to all successful play in terms of a scale of more or less “spacey” (poppy) than other times – as poppy mused “I think on balance if it was a... good scene then I would have been spacey. But how spacey...?” – while others use it to refer only to occasional extremes. There was general agreement that the experience of it would be different for everyone, that it is hard to imagine if you have never been there, and that you would know if you had been.

For most people there was a significant change in the experience of sub-space compared with ‘ordinary’ play-space, with sub-space being a peak or extreme state. Digi described his first experience of sub-space with Twisted, saying to her “I'm pretty sure on that occasion you could have kept going, just hitting me harder and harder and harder. You could have drawn blood and I would have been perfectly happy... it wasn't pain at all. It was just a warm, like we said earlier, a warm massage... It wasn't just a matter of my being in pain and my body being stretched. I was just floating”. Twisted had a similar experience of becoming unaware of pain, saying that it was “like being drunk, but just drunk on happiness. It's an odd feeling, but I didn't want it to end... I was aware enough of what he was doing to worry that clover clamps on the labia would hurt... but no, it didn't hurt, I was drifting”. Most people would agree that pain is a largely meaningless concept once someone has spaced and that, as Barry observed, a top could “probably get 99% of the way towards murdering” a bottom in sub-space. This is where the connection and “the trust comes in because then you have to [trust]. There's no way that I could safe-word under those circumstances” (Ivy). Not everyone wants to make themselves this vulnerable, Colin says that while he has “certainly taken ladies there, and they are very, very

vulnerable when they're there" he has not been there himself, because "I don't know that I want to lose control that much."

Ideas of drifting or floating are often used in descriptions of sub-space, as is the analogy of being drunk. The latter is more commonly used to describe what a person in sub-space might look like than it is used as a descriptor of the experience itself. Rocks, who as a switch can access both observing and experiencing it, concludes that "actually drunk is probably the wrong thing, slightly stoned is closer. It's that feeling that things are happening around you but not really comprehending why or what they are". Ivy describes it as "switching your brain off" and, along similar lines, Madeleine says it is a "kind of semi-tonic, tonic immobility. So, you know when you hold the back of a cat's neck and it [dangles]. But it's not just doing that to your body, its doing that to your brain". By contrast, cate described sub-space as "a garden", a fully realised space where "you walk through the little door and you're there, and it has plants and a big tree and, you know, a water feature and all this sort of thing. And it's bubbling, you can hear the water bubbling". Her descriptions of play where she did not 'space' are couched in much the same terms as others describe their sub-space experiences.

Sub-space is not the same every time, even if the people involved in making it are the same. Molly differentiates versions of sub-space by their effect on her body, saying that "sometimes it's like the lights are out, and it's very dark and I am very in my body. That's very calm and deep, and those are the times when I just want to get a blanket and go to sleep afterwards. I am just so relaxed. And then there are other times when it's just kind of hyper-bright. When it's still very in my body but it's almost, very energised within my body. Kind of hyper-stimulated. That... kind of leaves me wired... where I'm hyper almost rather than the opposite. And there's no [pause], I can't say that this makes this one and this makes that one". For poppy, different versions of sub-space are experienced as

colours. She says “blues and purples are beautiful colours and I can be in a blue and purple cloud and be very happy with that... Barry says that if I sort of got very excited and very elated, sometimes I can be in yellow then. But if he asks me where I am, if I'm sort of blues, turquoises, then he knows I'm in a happy place”. Personally, I characterise sub-space by my emotional state as I come out of it – there is sub-space when I cry, and there is sub-space where I bask in a wonderful contentment and joy.

Once sub-space has been reached it can take a while to return to normal even after play has stopped. People describe being very relaxed, very giggly and silly, sometimes completely non-verbal. For poppy, it is not her who has changed state, but the world around her. She says “I'm still me, but everybody else has shifted actually... It's them, they've all moved. They're slightly out of kilter... I'm sitting in the middle of whatever it is, and the rest of it has just moved round a little bit... I'm at sort of 12 o'clock and they're at 5 to because... They're just not there. They don't understand”. Rocks described the process of coming back as feeling that you are “not really quite being there, almost as though you're walking behind yourself and watching yourself on camera, or someone is following you around with a camera... You're not quite there, although you know you are. It's the contrast, the discrepancy between the two and you go [pause] OK”. He also described a state of vagueness saying, “I didn't know what I wanted to do”. This lack of desire meant that he had to carefully think through apparently simple things in stages – “a drink would be a good idea. How do we get a drink? We ask for a drink... [but] I don't think I was [able to]”. The lack of certainty or urgency and an absence of any particular desire to do anything are fairly typical; some people have a routine to ground themselves and are distressed if this is disrupted. On the first occasion she achieved sub-space with her Master, cate describes how the effects of spacing meant she was unable to explain to him what she needed: “I was sat wrapped in my blanket, and I really wanted my chocolate, and my Master was saying to me ‘no, you must have a toasty because its protein and you must

have this' and he wouldn't let me have a cigarette until I could prove that I was steady. And I just completely burst into tears. I had a complete fit".

Dom-Space

When it flows... for me it's not thinking about it, it's just kind of happening. And it's not out of body. It's not me looking down upon it, or me travelling beside myself and seeing it. I'm still in charge but it's just effortless. I'm not having to put any effort into it, it's just happening.

– Damien

I think the Buddhists will kill me if I say that it's like having nirvana, feeling of nothingness. It's feeling of nothingness. And that's also my definition of sub-space.

– Ben

Dom-space emerged in conversation less frequently and less spontaneously than sub-space. It was also subject to more diverse conceptualisation. Some people had never heard the term before. Others assumed that it must be a reference to the same qualitative state as sub-space and that it was therefore an impossibility for a responsible top. Kaz's observation of playing in the top role is one most tops would agree with – "I definitely never zone-out. I am always fully aware of everything I'm doing and saying". However, the idea of a peak in the top experience is problematic only if it is assumed that such a peak must always result in being less in control or aware of the self, of others and/or of ones surrounding. Rocks said that you can't achieve "the out of body part" of sub-space when you're topping, but you can reach a peak of Dominance in that "there's a certain point I've reached where you just say right, this is what we're doing. You are going to do it. You're going to put up with it and take what you're given". There were also some people who

applied the term to themselves, explaining how it was qualitatively different to sub-space. Stoney-face explained how a scene can build to a peak which transforms the experience of topping, calling it “that definite top-space extension of myself thing”. He says “it starts out as a tool, but as the scene develops, and the energy exchange develops... it becomes an extension. You transcend the mental process of your technique, making sure you hit them the right way and you've got proper form... once you lose that it transcends into ‘what am I doing to that one spot that's the size of dime on her ass?’... and it's just part of your arm at that point. I don't even see the cane anymore. It's where, that point that it's hitting. And I want to be really accurate so [pause] it transcends tool into extension of self really easily”. Javelin described Dom-space as “the drunkenness of using someone”, saying that this consists of “enjoying the power, and enjoying being in charge... that euphoria you feel when you pounded them good, and tortured them a bit, and made them cry”. These sorts of peaks of euphoria or a “feeling that when things are flowing that it's... the moment when you don't have to think any more, it just seems to occur” (Damien) were described by many tops, even those who did not know or like the phrase Dom-space.

A number characterised their Dom-space as being in sub-space with the bottom, experiencing the other side of that space in the same way that both sides are needed to create the play-space at all. Friedrich said “I think it is an equivalent. Kind of. I think they're like Yin and Yang, it's like day and night, one can't exist without the other”. Ben was unable to distinguish, because “the only difference is how you get there. The Dom takes the sub, the sub follows. If you're pulling a cart, the guy who is pulling, you and the cart they all get to that space. The only difference is the cart gets pulled and you pull... The journey is different; the space is the same”. Cee agreed that “sub-space is actually for the person giving as much as the person receiving... You are just, this sort of sub-conscious state, tuned into a body part and that person's voice, and you are completely oblivious to

everything else around you... You've gone through that keyhole and you've hit the wall right at the very end”.

But however these peaks are understood they are not an aim of play, or the best kind of play. The attitude is generally that “if it happens, it happens” (Ivy).

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter offers rich description in relation to commonly referenced qualities of play-spaces and the sensory experiences within them. It appears that any successful play-space involves the creation of a degree of ‘altered consciousness’ and separation from the everyday world, which contributes to the value and importance ascribed to play. There is also the possibility of peaks or extremes of altered consciousness in the form of Dom- or sub-space. These peaks appear to form the basis of existing academic work on BDSM as spiritual in nature – an imperfect perspective, which draws on a narrow understanding of religion and equates experience of these states with a Christianised understanding of mysticism. By contrast, using religion as a framework will allow all experiences of BDSM play to carry equal weight. I argue that experiences of play, in all their variation, contribute to an individual's sense that their kink as a whole is powerful, potentially transformative and productive of important and worthwhile experience; in sum the sense of their kink as a gestalt. Play experience contributes to identity and community making, and self- and world-understanding. The sense of meaning and worth that becomes associated with the activity is an element of the felt sense of gestalt as it develops out of the experience of play.

The next chapter explores one of the ways in which play spills over the boundaries of the play-space by examining kink as a subcultural identity. Kink style is explored as both a contributor to such identity and as an experiential component in making play-spaces.

8 – Subcultural Identity: Kink in Context and in Clothes

Anything that's fixed on the body for a long period of time changes your outlook on life. It changes your relationship to the body you're living in. If you put on a tight belt and wear it for 20 hours strange things will happen to you. Not just physically, but to your consciousness psychically and spiritually.

– (Musafar, 1989 p.9)

We use the conventions of roles to remove the masks of the daily roles we've allowed ourselves to become. It's a nakedness that we are not accustomed to. To be bare-faced like this is to expose all of the self: the strength, the beauty, the frightening and the frailty.

– (Midori, 2005 p.16)

Practising BDSM involves many different elements – a range of tools, both specially made and not, furniture likewise, also bodies, relationships and real-and-imagined spaces. All the elements interact with one another to create the experience of doing BDSM, and all feed into and are fed by the wider context which shapes both experiences and possible understandings of them. Even though the experience of being in play-space is deeply immersive, it does not come into existence in a vacuum devoid of context, sub-text, or other bodies of various kinds. The context in which my research participants live and practice their kinks cannot be solely that of the kink Scene. Scenes are actively constructed by those who site their practice within them (Moberg and Ramstedt, 2016), but this construction occurs both within and against mainstream culture; it is made from and by people who were born into a complex society, who grew, developed and discovered their kinks in the context of that society and the world it creates, and who were influenced by this milieu in both subtle and unsubtle ways.

The world in which my research participants live, and therefore the context of their practice and self-understanding, is a hypermodern world. Capitalism, industrialisation, rationalisation, institutions and surveillance have extended and are extending to what might once have been considered extremes. In an ongoing process of radicalisation, the values established by modernity have “passed over into a logic of excess, to the point where no counter-power seems able to oppose their frenetic development” (Charles, 2009 p.391). This is a time of hyper-individualism, constant change and rampant commercialisation. Technological and scientific developments are rapid and “heavy with threats as well as promises” (Lipovetsky and Charles, 2005 p.31). One of the things created by all this is a culture of radical individualism in which self-fulfilment is the highest virtue (Baumeister, 1988, Baumeister, 1991, Varga, 2005). The relational functions of the body – emotion, sexuality, perception and so on – are denied and minimised, and the boundary role of skin potentially reinforced, cutting us off from others (Hall, 2010); individuals are viewed as autonomous, unitary selves, wholly responsible for themselves and their happiness, creators of their own identity. Within this context the human body is “a mode of specification of individuals” (Foucault, 1978 p.47) that exists as “an analysed, theorised, politicised, and sensationalised entity, concurrently functioning as a medium for physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual transformation” (Winge, 2012 p.1). Personal identity and self-understanding are thus partly expressed in the ways people choose to mark their bodies through clothing and other consumer choices. In a hypermodern world, the idea of fashion – once a pillar of modernity (Lunning, 2013) – has grown in significance, as each individual style choice is felt to reflect “individual identity, politics, ideology and lifestyle” (Winge, 2012 p.1). Personal style is neither trivial nor frivolous, but a part of self- and world-creation and a factor in the forming of meaningful relationships.

The focus of this chapter is kink as a subcultural identity, and the role of kink-associated fashion in the context of hypermodernity. Style is not restricted to clothing

choice, but includes any objects necessary to enable the performance of the chosen identity (Lunning, 2013). In its contribution to the forming of personal identity, kink fashion is one strand of the story- and meaning-making role of BDSM; it is therefore an aspect of the gestalt value kink holds for the individual, as cultural and sub-cultural norms and values are both expressed and transgressed by kink practitioners. This is fashion “in its performance as costume...[as] the clothing of an actor playing a role” (Lunning, 2013 p.1), even where that role is experienced as an authentic expression of identity. Through the ability to dress in particular ways, an individual “experiences a space of freedom” that “allows for the flow of imagined identities [and] sustains and enriches the individual subject through group recognition and interplay” (2013 p.12). At the same time, the expressions of autonomy, free choice and difference, which are felt as an inherent part of the transgression of norms, conform to a core value of hypermodernity.

Clothing the Sub-Cultural Body

I look at the Coyote spirit in the more trickster element of playful jokes and things of that nature... I love, inside the kink context, to be at play parties going around and making people laugh... I run around with a see-through elephant mesh G-string with bells in it to get people to die in hysterics. And over the knee stockings, it's awesome.

– Stoney-face

Some people [I work with] could be cross-dressing; they're then able to, as soon as they visually see themselves, they then go into another world.

– Cee

The wearing of clothes is a powerful cultural norm, to the point where nudity in public places may well be criminalised.⁸ Clothing in a hypermodern world is thus not only functional protection from the elements, but an expression of values. When the concept of fashion, style and personal identity are recognised, the matter of what people wear becomes more complex still, with the ways in which people choose to present themselves visually to others serving as a signal of identity, ideology, politics, morality, lifestyle and more (Haenfler, 2014, Winge, 2012). Sending visual signals about self and identity, allegiances and values, is not restricted to clothing choices but includes other ways of marking and presenting the body. Possible body modifications range from dying hair to remodelling physical shape, from painting the skin with make-up to etching into it with needles, blades or brands. It is through a selection of such means that appearance becomes “body style” (Winge, 2012), a deliberate displaying of identity and affiliation. “Objects of effectuation” (Lunning, 2013 p.101), meaning the items used to create particular effects or aspects of identity performance, can also form a part of a chosen body style. In the context of kink, such objects would range from the obviously kinky whips, canes, crops and so on to the more subtle – choice of shoes, a *Story of O* (Réage, 1985) style ring or an ‘[every] day collar’.

⁸ Most commonly prosecuted in the UK as “disorderly behaviour” under S5 of the Public Order Act 1986, or as the common law offence of Outraging Public Decency http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/l_to_o/nudity_in_public/ - accessed 12-Apr-2016



8: Jewellery with a kink 'edge', inset Story of O ring

Body style is an important tool of communication for Scenes which consciously set themselves apart from mainstream culture. Such groups build from the individual lived-body experiences of group members to create collective ideas about identity. These are both shared and contested in an ongoing process of constructing an authenticity for the group (Moberg and Ramstedt, 2016). Part of this process is the establishing, and continual development, of guidelines or codes, which are unwritten but commonly understood about authentic appearance and what is (un)acceptable within the group. Style choices for a subcultural Scene may well include elements considered non-normative by the wider society, but both style and subcultural identity are complicated by the fact that, as Winge observes, “what is acceptable and normative is increasingly consumed from subcultural entities” (2012 p.48). The line between what is mainstream and what is not is increasingly blurred.

Offering a working definition of the concept of subculture, Haenfler (2014) states that the term is more a descriptor for an ongoing process of social networking. Although the boundaries of such networks are diffuse, members of subcultures have some sense of shared identity, actively create (and contest) meanings around practice, objects, ideas and values which are, to some degree, deviations from the norm. Because of this, subcultural identity also conveys a degree of outsider status. It is clear that the kink Scene constitutes a subculture: it is a group constituted by and through ongoing relationships, and the values and meanings given to the experiences and objects associated with those relationships; it is smaller than society as a whole, and distinguishes itself from the mainstream on the basis of engagement in specific activities (Winge, 2012).

There are a number of strong visual stereotypes associated with kink. These are used within mainstream popular culture to signal a degree of edginess and to mark dramatic depictions of kinky people (Scott, 2015). They include corsetry, gleaming latex (usually black or red), extreme high-heels and uniforms (or sexualised versions of uniforms). Collectively these looks are often referred to as fetish fashion, perhaps because these items are also common foci for paraphilias. However, they are commonly worn at kink events by people who do not experience the items themselves as the objects of a sexual fetish. The widespread use of these strong visuals in fashion, film and other popular culture is a matter of some concern in the kink community. This is not only because it perpetuates a stereotype many reject, but because of the resulting transfer of kink style into mainstream fashion. It is sometimes said that “SM” has, in recent years, come to mean “Stand and Model” (Califia, 1994, MacKendrick, 1999, Weiss, 2011), as the fashion industry and popular culture borrow dramatic looks from the kink Scene to add “an entirely superficial sense of ‘edginess’” (Scott, 2015 p.58) to their products.

A focus on clothing is not purely a matter of aesthetic choice, but serves as a basis for expressing broader concerns. The worry “our tribal gear” (Califia, 1994 p.42) is being appropriated by people who have no interest in actually doing kinky things, but who seek an easy route to the flavour of the exotic they feel is communicated by the look is one such concern, touching on questions about subcultural membership and authenticity . Scott (2015) suggests that an increasingly visually orientated culture feeds the perception that looking kinky provides an indicator of who is kinkiest, which in turn implies not dressing the part means you are not ‘really’ kinky. Both the existence and rejection of such perceptions emerged during my conversation with Michael, who observed “I’m just not sure why I have to dress up to be a part of this. Why do I have to look funny, in my eyes, to do this? And yet the more ridiculous I look the more accepted I will be. If I showed up wearing a clown suit with scuba-fins and a mariachi band behind me people would go ‘look how kinky this guy is!’”. He says he is “fairly resistant” to any emphasis on look, and points out the irony in having joined “an alternative life style, that is breaking the rules of mainstream society and then the first thing they do is make up more rules. You know, you can come to our fetish event if you dress in this way that everyone else will recognise as being part of the fetish world”. This is a concern with authenticity, understood as the difference between being a person who does kinky things as opposed to looking like a kinky person in order to shock or to follow a fashion.

A related area of concern is that, through adoption of a kink aesthetic, non-kinky people might be led into potentially dangerous practices they don't understand or respect (Scott, 2015, Weiss, 2011). This was referenced by my research participants, as in Damien's description of girls entering the kinky scene with an interest in the aesthetic of a corset piercing (parallel lines of rings through which ribbon can be threaded), because “they've seen pictures of corseting and that's what they want. They like the look... But they don't

realise all that's involved". As a result, they are surprised and distressed when faced with the actual process of piercing and inserting the rings.

It is true that corsets, latex and heels feature heavily in pornography, edgy music videos and dramatic depictions of kink (Scott, 2015), but it is open to question whether what is now recognised as a kinky look actually originated in an underground subculture before being appropriated by the fashion industry, or whether it has developed (and continues to develop) in a cyclical process fed by many streams (Lunning, 2013). What is certain is that BDSM clubs usually do have a dress code of some kind, which may be as simple as 'no jeans' or as detailed as this example from the Torture Garden:⁹

Details

Dungeon & Medical Playroom
SM & Medical Play Equipment by Play Penz
Music: Atmospheric, Ritual, Erotica, Electronica, Boudoir, Ambient Soundscapes

Couples Playroom


• Installations • Multi-Screen Visuals

Enforced Fantasy Dress Code (Full Costumes Only / No Half Measures / TG is an Extreme Event for Extreme People!):
Fetish, Body Art, SM, Burlesque, Berlin Kabaret, Drag, Medical,

Militaria, Uniform, Moulin Rouge, Venice Carnival, Circus Carnival, Top Hat & Tails

No Casual Streetwear / No Jeans (even black) / No Street Camouflage / No Cotton T-shirts or Underpants / No suits (even with a hat) No Cheap Fancy Dress Copies! You will not be admitted to the event if your outfit includes any of these items!!
No Hen or Stag Parties!
No Refund if Not in Dress Code!
No Cameras / No Use of Mobile Phones!

Adv Tickets: Tickets on sale soon

TG Info: www.torturegarden.com/  +44 (0) 20 7613 4733

Even where not specified by a formal dress code, all the types and forms of "Fantasy Dress" specified above can be seen at play clubs and parties, although people playing at home are unlikely to dress up unless the particular item of clothing, or material it is constructed from, is the object of a sexual fetish for them.

⁹ www.torturegarden.com/events1 - accessed 26-Feb-2016

Given the strength of the BDSM aesthetic and the ubiquity of images which fit the stereotype, even within kinky social networks, I cannot help but notice how rarely clothing was mentioned as an important element of play during my research conversations. It was considered in the most depth by the two among my research participants who use cross-dressing as an integral part of their play: Colin, who is primarily interested in CP (Corporal Punishment) chooses a look particularly associated with that sub-genre of kink in the form of a girls' school uniform, which he wears with high-heeled shoes; and Simon/Effie who chooses a more BDSM-typical look based on black PVC.¹⁰ Contra to stereotype he doesn't wear heels, to ensure he is shorter than his play-partners.

Both of them did consider the visual aesthetic of their chosen clothing, but this did not appear to be a matter of central concern. Simon/Effie saying that he does "have an appreciation. I quite like looking at Effie in the mirror and admiring myself as Effie. I find that interesting, and sexy. Not necessarily in a highly, highly erotic kind of way. But almost in a sensual way. I feel great. I really do". It is interesting to note how the focus shifts here, from the visual looking at himself to the way that he feels. By contrast Colin finds his school uniform important to "cover all this flab and this horrible body up" and made no mention of looking at himself when dressed. Although Simon/Effie does like to look at himself when dressed for play, he also referred to cross-dressing as a means of addressing a dislike of his body: "What I'm doing is trying to hide my body, wherever I can, and showing the bits that I want to show... I don't like it. I don't like it. It's not attractive. I'm too old to be, to have a beautiful body. [Being dressed as Effie] hides my bits. I've got just the right bits on display".

¹⁰ Effie is the name Simon adopts when dressed for play. Effie is not simply an alternate persona wholly separate from Simon, so I have chosen to use both names together to indicate that one does not/cannot exist without the other.

For both of them, cross-dressing offers an opportunity for bodily experience free from concerns about body image. This was something other people referenced as well. Mistress Marina says that “I think one of the reasons I love being in that [play] space so much is it's one of the few times in my life when I accept my physicality. Because I do not like my physicality day to day. If I walk by, see myself in a shop window, that's it. I'm down for the rest of the day... [Usually] I try to avoid myself”. In several different research conversations, I likewise observed that when I play looks are “a non-issue” for me, saying that “I feel beautiful when I play, and I look beautiful too. I mean I look in the mirror after and I see beauty, which is absolutely not what I would see if I looked right now!” (author, in conversation with Mistress Marina). An emphasis on feeling is not unusual; Colin plays in a way that requires particular clothing but he explicitly distances the visual and emphasises the felt nature of the experience of being cross-dressed, saying that “I know I probably look a bit strange in my school uniform but I *feel* lovely in it” (his emphasis). Simon/Effie made the same distinction, even while describing a visual. Esteban distinguishes between the visual and the somatic experience even more explicitly, saying he deliberately avoids seeing himself dressed in latex, or wearing a leather harness, because “if I look at myself if I'm in a harness or something like that, I just look at myself and think ‘oh, that's a bit daft. That's a bit stupid...’ It breaks the mood”. Although he appreciates the visual image of himself dressed, Simon/Effie also says that “my body makes more sense as Effie. My physical body”.

However, wearing fetish style clothing is not purely a matter of a visual aesthetic, even in relation to an improved self-image. Subcultural styles are not simply about conforming to a pre-existing set of fashion rules, but are the performance of an authentic identity. Importantly, authenticity is not felt to arise simply from the choice to wear these clothes, or even to attend the events that both require and showcase them, but from what informs or motivates those choices. The distinction is perceived as between ‘being’ a

subcultural member and merely 'doing', or performing, aspects of the subculture (Haenfler, 2014, Newmahr, 2011b, Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1990), and the emphasis on feeling is an important indicator of the performance of authenticity.

Even from the perspective of a purely visual aesthetic choice, clothing can be an important signal of identity – gothic 'bondage trousers' (trousers decorated with cloth straps and buckles) are not often seen in play clubs or at kink parties, perhaps because they are not up to the task of genuinely restraining someone, but a person's choice to wear them nevertheless signals something about how the wearer feels about themselves. Similarly, items of clothing that would be seen at kink venues – and probably only at kink venues, or on catwalks – signal something about the individual's kink identity. For example, a spanking (backless) skirt is unlikely to be worn by someone who exclusively tops. However, it is also clear that when considered in more depth such clothing is more than just a visual signal.

Bodies in Clothes

What I don't like about clubs is the dress-code... I feel I'm too old and I've put on too much weight to wear [fetish clothing] and that doesn't make me who I am... I don't see why I should have to wear PVC, or rubber, or leather or a uniform to enjoy play... But I can go to fetish club in a dress with my teacher's gown and I'm allowed in because I've got a teacher gown. But the dress underneath is who I actually am. So, when I start playing I take my gown off, and I'm just me!

– Kaz

I don't wear heels, because if you wear heels when you're doing that you always want to tip backwards... It's about slipping, or if

you're in a place that has rubbish on the floor or wet spots or things
like that... it's just a distraction.

– Aey

The surface of the skin is always sensitive. An awareness of what is touching the skin at any given moment is always available, “we just have to attend, and there it is” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b p.139). This includes things which are so commonplace, or so constantly in contact with the skin, that the way they feel usually lies below the surface of conscious awareness. While it is possible to choose to attend to the tactility of clothing against skin, this feeling does not force itself into our awareness every day. By contrast, clothing worn only for special occasions may do so – a person who rarely wears a tie will be conscious of its pressure on their neck, and may feel short of breath or restricted in the ways they can move their head.

Iconic items of kink clothing offer examples of clothing which create an experience of wearing them that is noticeably different from wearing other clothing. This is important because, as has already been observed, these outfits are so firmly entwined with the practice of kink in the cultural imaginary that a customer visiting a professional Dominatrix might feel entitled to complain if she is not so dressed. In addition, entry to shared social spaces may be restricted for those choosing not to conform. Yet it is also true that when play takes place in such shared spaces much of this special clothing is removed. I suggest that this has at least as much to do with the multi-sensory experience of wearing it, and the potential of that to distract from the play (in the same way that catching sight of himself in latex was a distraction for Esteban), as it has to do with a desire not to damage expensive consumer goods.

The spectrum of commercially available clothing ranges from the slightly ‘edgy’ style to an extreme aesthetic commitment to a particular look – from a “corset back” on a

shirt perhaps, in the form of some largely decorative criss-crossed lacing, to a steel-boned waist-training corset worn twenty-four hours a day. Corset lacing, decorative straps, buckles, zips and studs constitute a fashion fetish look which overlaps with goth, punk and rock aesthetics. This kind of clothing may or may not form part of a kinky person's everyday wardrobe, but it certainly would not get someone into a club like the Torture Garden, which asks attendees to remember "if your outfit wouldn't turn heads in the street – don't bother to wear it to Torture Garden".¹¹ Whether or not it would constitute 'making an effort' for less particular clubs would be down to the individual preferences of the organisers, but if the rule were 'no street clothes' the prevalence of such garments on the high-street makes it unlikely. Wearing fetish fashion clothes is a sensory experience on a par with any other everyday outfit: the clothes are put on the same way and chosen to allow people to get on with the things they want to do on an everyday basis. But at the other end of the spectrum of kink clothing this is no longer true.

Putting on the Kink

Corsets are a pain in the arse... Because they take half an hour to take off... I like the aesthetic in the street more than in a fetish club.

– Demon

I've got a latex cat-suit which I enjoy wearing [pause] I hate the smell of it... but I do love the experience... having a tight second skin all over... Yeah. So, that's nice.

– Esteban

It is broadly true that, the more overtly kinky the clothing, the more the experience of wearing it differs from that of putting on and wearing everyday clothes. Putting on kink

¹¹ <http://www.torturegarden.com/about> - accessed 11-Mar-2016

clothing is not like slipping on a jumper. It is a ritual process that involves a degree of skill, practice and relationship. Getting dressed in kink style can signal the start of passage into a kink- or play-space.

One example of iconic kink clothing which illustrates this well is the corset. Fashion corsets are typically 'boned' with plastic strips, to create a smooth outline which highlights the curve of the waist, rather than actually changing the shape of the wearer. In a kink context, corsets are more likely to have metal bones and be intended to reshape the waist to some degree. The experience of wearing this kind of corset begins from the moment of deciding to put it on, because it is likely that some help will be required to get into it. A 'proper' or 'real' corset, with steel bones, should be a minimum of two inches smaller than the un-corseted waist. Putting it on therefore requires loosening the laces to a sufficient extent to get the garment fastened; the more inches one desires to trim from the waist measurement the harder this will be to achieve, and the more likely it is that assistance will be needed to hold the edges together while simultaneously working the fastenings. The most common front fastening is a busk – two flat strips of metal which run up each of the front edges. One side has a line of short pegs and the other has flat metal eyelets with a keyhole shape; the peg needs to be inserted through the round part of the eyelet and is then pulled sideways so the upright of the peg is gripped tightly in the narrower part and cannot slip back out. The absolute inflexibility of the busk means that, ideally, the entire row needs to be fastened in one movement – a surprisingly hard to achieve manoeuvre, even with an empty corset. But when the garment is under tension, as it is when being pulled together against the resistance of the natural body shape, fastening a busk can become a deeply frustrating exercise, in which the middle peg in particular resists alignment and connection. Even corsets that fasten in other ways still need to be held together at both top and bottom to do up those fastenings, so additional hands are extremely helpful. Once the garment is basically on and fastened around the body, then

the process of tightening the laces can begin. It is hard to tighten laces located at the middle of the back fully and evenly by oneself, but it is necessary that they be adjusted if the corset is to fit properly. Ideally, tightening is done from the centre of the vertical line of lacing, working both upwards and downwards to achieve as even a gap along the length of the corset as possible. After about half an hour of wear laces should be tightened again as the corset warms and moulds more to the shape of the body.

The result of all this is a torso encased in fabric and metal from hips to armpits. At a minimum a corset has metal bones along the full length of each seam, as well as at each side of the front fastening and on either side of the rows of eyelet holes for the lacing. The garment as a whole shapes the body beneath it. It holds the spine straight and pulls the shoulders back. Bending and twisting are, at best, severely restricted, and some kinds of movement are impossible, so that it is a good idea to fasten shoes before you put on a corset! The feel of posture and movement is also changed, not only those movements which clearly involve the back and stomach – like bending forward – but also walking, and even arm movements, as the flesh of the waist is displaced upwards. It is possible to sit down while wearing a corset, although getting into a low chair is challenging and getting up from it again may require help. Seated posture and position in the seat will be changed though, and slouching or lounging will be uncomfortable; an upright chair becomes a preferable option to a sofa. The kinaesthetic experience of the body is changed, not only in the ways limbs can move, but in the movements of the flesh itself; for example, breasts are likely to be pushed upwards, which is visually pleasing to many, but is a vastly different kinaesthetic experience to the wearing of a brassiere. All of this means corset-wearing is far from being purely about the visual presented to others but is an experience in its own right.

Latex is also more of a sensory experience than the simple creation of a visual look; Esteban told me that he loves wearing his latex catsuit but “I’m not fond of the smell of it”, he also dislikes the way it looks. However, for him the experience overall is strong enough to overcome multiple unpleasant sensory elements. Latex is a well-known fetish item, so ‘rubberists’ form a shared interest group beneath the kink umbrella. Esteban however did not appear to regard himself as having a fetish for latex, and indeed his dislike of the smell and look would argue against that being the case. For him the tactile experience is more akin to an experience of bondage, which is his primary play interest.

Latex is versatile enough to be made into any style of garment, but it is most commonly used for items like catsuits, which are skin-tight over at least part of the body. In its most extreme form a latex catsuit covers the entire surface of the body leaving apertures for eyes, nostril and lips (and maybe not even all these). Because it stretches a great deal some latex garments have no fastening at all; instead, an opening like the neck band must be stretched sufficiently to insert limbs and the garment is then worked across the skin to cover the parts it is shaped to cover. It is possible to make a whole body catsuit with no fastening (thus ensuring the smoothest possible outline) but many are zipped in various locations which may or may not be accessible to the wearer.

Tight latex requires skill, patience and possible assistance to put on. Although it stretches with varying degrees of ease (depending on the thickness of the rubber), once it touches skin it clings to it. It also induces sweat which exacerbates the clinging over time. This means that it is impossible to just pull it straight on (as would be the case with other fabrics) and once it is on it is challenging to adjust. A sensible first step is to dust the inside of the garment with talcum powder or similar, so that it can be eased over the body. With a garment like a catsuit this easing process begins at the feet, as the area most distant from the opening. The latex needs to fit smoothly and comfortably there before it is drawn

further up the legs. Other garments are worked on in the same way, by choosing a starting point and sitting it correctly before working on the next part. Once latex is covering a patch of skin it can only be adjusted by sliding a hand in between the skin and the latex to break the seal. If the entire garment is on, and an unwanted crease is spotted by the ankle, the easiest thing to do is to peel the garment off to that point and start again from there. How much help is required in this process will vary with the size and fit of the garment and with the wearer's level of experience in putting it on, but it is certainly a process which must be learned. Ensuring that it is sitting correctly on the body, that the seams run where they should and that any zips are properly fastened, are all points at which assistance is helpful.

Once it is on the garment is likely to need polishing; not everyone likes to wear their latex polished to the high shine which tends to feature in fetish photography, but the use of talc or lubricant is likely to mark the outside of the garment as well as the inside. Polishing the garment removes these, and any finger-marks, as well as brightening the colour. This stage of the process almost certainly requires third party assistance to make sure that everywhere is equally clean and shiny. The process of getting dressed is thus not only a tactile experience, but a relational one, as the garment is firmly rubbed over the flesh. Latex itself, and the different options available to aid putting it on and shining it up, all have distinctive scents, which will change as the latex warms to body temperature.

Wearing latex is physically restrictive, although in a different way to the rigidity of a corset. It has a degree of stretch, but the resistance is palpable and becomes more so as the stretch is increased. Worn skin-tight there is a subtle but constant squeeze of pressure, and this can be felt loosening and re-grasping as the body moves within the garment. Because skin under latex cannot breathe, sweat cannot evaporate; instead the latex lies over a sheen of moisture. This not only makes it difficult to remove but means that, when it is finally off, there is a sudden temperature change as the wet skin is exposed to the air.

This combines with a sense of the skin releasing itself from the folds and creases it has been moulded into while the latex was being worn. All these different elements contribute to the fetishisation of latex, and the common recognition of latex as a fetish object means that wearing it is more likely to be recognised as an experience in its own right than the wearing of corsets. It may also be more likely to be indulged in simply for that experience than for the visual image it creates.

It is interesting to note, given the emphasis on intimacy and relationship inherent in successful play, that both these popular modes of kink dress entail relationship and touch in the physical creation of the look, while the physical experience of wearing them is one of constriction and holding in. Lunning argues that a desire for constriction is rooted in a desire for boundaries which can “expand into a series of inner and outer, psychic and physical markers that contain, confine and define” (2013 p.81) within the different world of the play-space. Westerfelhaus observes that “many of the costumes and rituals employed by BDSM... such as hoods, bondage and suspension, which promote sensory deprivation... coupled with or followed by activities producing sensory overload” are designed and intended to “disrupt ordinary consciousness” (2007 p.270). In this he is correct, but his association of “costumes” with those items intended to create sensory deprivation is overly narrow. The processes of putting on kink clothing can be a part of the ritual of play, by creating anticipation (Ezzy, 2011) and signalling the beginnings of liminality (Ezzy et al., 2009). In addition, the sensations involved in wearing these items, in moving and playing in them, and in having them removed again, are fully multi-sensory and relational kink experiences. Far from being a peripheral part of the event, clothing can contribute to creating the spaces for play, to the desired sensory overload (or sensory deprivation) and to the return to the everyday world. Such clothing can distract from or muffle other sensations, if the desire is to experience these fully then clothing is likely to

be removed, however such muffling or reduction of intensity might also be used to aid in the exploration of limits.



9: Bondage Equipment

Community of Consumption

My biggest disappointment with the whole thing is that even these supposedly liberal minded people... there are still snobs. There are still people who think their way is the best way and nobody else can match it; or 'you're not using the right sort of implement', or 'you didn't buy your whip from such and such a place'. And that was my biggest disappointment with the whole thing.

– Damien

I think you grow up when you come into the Scene. When you're first in it it's like being a kid in a toyshop... and you go there and you buy that, and that, and that... and you want to play with everybody and everything. And then after a while you start thinking 'Oh, I don't really fancy those things. I only really like those sweets'. And you

tend to be a bit more choosy about who and what you do. So, you don't get as much of it but what you do get is a better quality.

– Mistress Marina

Given the dress requirements of many kink events, and the powerful cultural associations between kink and clothing style, it is interesting to realise that to actually engage in play frequently requires a degree of undressing again, at least on the part of the bottom. This may be partly because these outfits are expensive, and strenuous play might cause them damage. Fetish garments require a degree of specialist skill in their manufacture that means even 'off the peg' versions are likely to be costly, and many people choose to buy bespoke garments, both for better fit and to have something unique. A good quality latex dress or bespoke corset can hundreds of pounds, and a reluctance to risk splits, tears, stains or other damage is therefore understandable. This is probably not the sole reason as it is also true that, while the bottom is fully clothed, the possibility for creating sensation is limited and the intensity potentially dulled; the restrictive nature of much fetish clothing also impacts on the positions that can be adopted and held by the bottom and the free movement of the top. Nevertheless, the costs associated with BDSM, at least in the contexts of the Scene and public play, have been remarked upon by a number of commentators (Newmahr, 2011b, Weiss, 2011) and used to argue that in a hypermodern, commercialised world "individualism and choice are not equally available across the social landscape" (Weiss, 2011 p.172).

Weiss has thoroughly explored BDSM as "community of consumption" and she argues that the purchase of BDSM equipment and clothing contributes to the "production of identity, community and attendant social relations" (2011, p.111) for kinky people, just as it does in other parts of society, including subcultures (Haenfler, 2014). This observation is in accord with concerns about stand & model BDSM, which raises the concern that "the

ability to purchase SM paraphernalia so easily, and have these purchases signify one's SM identity or community belonging, will destroy the spiritual centre, heart, or something else *authentic* about SM relationality" (Weiss, 2011 p.126). The removal of clothing for play can be seen as an attempt to cut through the idea of a purchased or surface image to expose or get at the 'real' player beneath the exciting outfit.

The removal of costume, and the resulting potential for nakedness, is mentioned by Weiss only in passing. For example, in her descriptions of a 'slave auction' she describes 'slaves' voluntarily stripping, being stripped by their 'vendor' or, in one case, stripping off layer after layer of clothing and underclothing so that they never actually become naked. She describes this young woman as having the last laugh and notes that she was a top, although being auctioned as a bottom. I see this as indicative of the meanings the Scene places on the wearing and removal of clothing, but this is not explored in greater depth. Whether this is reflective of the communities with whom Weiss was working or the issue was in some way outside her area of interest is unclear, but I find it a surprising omission in an exploration of BDSM as a circuit which "works when connections are created between realms that are imagined as isolated and opposed" (Weiss, 2011 p.7). That the BDSM Scene create such circuits I have little doubt, but I find it likely that the use of both dress and public nudity within the Scene contributes to that circuit, as a part of the performative production of subjects.

While the focus of my research is the experience of play, and the meanings which are then ascribed to that experience, the issues of capitalism and consumerism are part of the hypermodern context in which BDSM happens and so cannot be entirely ignored. Kink consumer goods extend beyond clothing to the toys and tools which are arguably a more fundamental part of play than costume. Weiss observes that, although people insist it is entirely possible to practice BDSM without spending any money at all, she failed to find

anyone who did so. Instead she suggests that a varied toy-bag, filled with a range of expensive items designed to create specific sensations, comes to be read as a signal of the skills and experience of the top. More expensive, well-made toys may also have an intrinsic artistic value, and a sense of enhanced utility that comes with quality. For Weiss, this aesthetic element can only be appreciated as an enhancement to play if the person buying the item has some knowledge of how it is used, and therefore why this particular one would be worth paying more for. She sees this as a process of consumer knowledge that allows people to “construct themselves as active subjects through differentiated consumption” (2011 p.113). While BDSM has been presented as a site of resistance to capitalist commodity exchange (Carrette, 2005) Weiss disagrees, because BDSM is “productive of more than love” (2011 p.136), and so its pleasures cannot be directly opposed to commodity exchange. She argues instead for understanding the different forms of exchange involved in BDSM as operating together, “producing forms of identity, subjectivity, pleasure, relationality and community” (2011 p.137).

That commodities and services proliferate around the kink Scene is undeniable; toys and equipment cost money whether they are purchased from a high-street sex shop or from a specialist producer of kink goods. Attendance at kink events likewise costs money, for entry fees and travel at the very least. In this, BDSM is no different to many other leisure activities that are more accessible to practitioners with disposable income and, as Newmahr's conceptualisation of kink as serious leisure indicates, such commitment of capital has become a partial measure of how highly people value their chosen leisure activity. Serious leisure is distinguished both from more casual leisure and from purely sexual activity in its involvement of public spaces, the “appreciable learning curve, financial expenditures and... social network” (2010b p.314). People committed to a given activity as serious leisure choose to put time, effort and resources into the development of their skills and the continuation of their practice. Some people spend their money on sky-diving,

some people spend it on attending sports events and some people spend it on their kink. They make this commitment because of what they get out of the activity, which may well include a sense of resistance to the norms of mainstream society but which also involves “intense concentration, intense sensation, and intense psychological and emotional stimulation [resulting in] an immersive and re-energising experience” (2010b p.324).

Weiss suggests a perception that status and skill-level are often inferred from a person’s toy collection and the brand names it includes, but my participants did not communicate this idea (2011). However, some did speak of the pleasure to be had in using well-made and aesthetically pleasing tools. The importance of these was in the feel of their use (for both top and bottom) and in a more general delight in good craftsmanship. In the latter context, people named a craftsman who makes one-of-a-kind floggers from hand-turned wood – the closest to a brand-name anyone came during our conversations. I find it interesting that on the occasions when I have shown one of his floggers to an academic audience it has produced the same kinds of response in terms of aesthetic appreciation for the beauty of the item and the craft which went into making it as can be seen in the kinky people clustering around his stall at a fetish market. The only observable difference seems to be that academics apparently feel no need to ask someone to bend over so they can try it out.

My research participants are undoubtedly aware of the interactions between consumer culture and kink, and some of these circuits may be of concern to them. Outlay on expensive custom-made tools and costumes is not an explicit requirement of any club or group of which I am aware, but may be felt by some to be necessary as a part of the unspoken guidelines that inform subcultural style. What is also true is that many people find great satisfaction in exploring ‘pervertables’ – Oliver described this as “making stuff out of ordinary household stuff”. This does potentially reduce the costs of stocking a toy

bag, but again the satisfaction described is less that of thrift than it is of “creating the means to an end... to create the experience” (Esteban). The list of “ordinary household stuff” that can be used for kink purposes is only limited by the imagination of the user, but a list of the more obvious items would include: elastic bands, clothes pegs, wooden spoons/spatulas, rulers, meat tenderisers, slippers, plimsolls, candles, hairbrushes, cable ties, shoe horns, ice, root ginger, cling-film, ties, belts and scarves. There is also the human body itself, which can interact with other bodies in many ways. Speaking of tools for delivering a beating, Oliver says that “the best thing is your hand, [because] I like the closeness that comes with that”. Mistress Marina agrees, “I very rarely use a lot of equipment because I tend to think ‘I’ve got my nails, I’ve got my teeth. I don’t need anything’. I’ve usually managed to do what I need to do with those”. This is not simply an issue of saving money but of the intimacy and connection which are so fundamental to the play experience.

The existence of consumption in kink can be argued as an indication of a subculture, defined by the consumption of items which contribute to a prefabricated image. But this is over-simplistic. In the context of hypermodernity, consumption is an element of any lifestyle. But to focus on this is to ignore the power and value of the activities around which the BDSM identity is formed. What I can say with certainty is that the ownership or lack of ownership of specific items did not seem to be significant to the nature of quality of experience my research participants shared, or in how they constructed their own kink identities.

Naked Bodies

I take my clothes off at a club, but I don't want to go to a nudist beach... well I did once, and Barry made me keep my clothes on...

I don't want to be with a load of [va]'nilla people without any clothes on. That wouldn't work.

– poppy

My Master sometimes says, when I am naked and I just have my collar on – because it needs a key, which I don't have, so I always have my collar on – he says that I am properly dressed then.

– pussikin

It is true that fetish clothing is expensive, and that play might expose it to damage. But when the experience of play is put at the centre of consideration it seems likely that more than that concern is involved in the removal of clothing for play. The fact that being naked can only have meaning in a dialectic with the state of being clothed is often overlooked (Barcan, 2004), but it is nevertheless true; to know that you are naked, whatever that statement means to you, is dependent on your knowledge of being clothed as an alternate state. Nakedness in the context of kink often draws on this interrelationship and the complex feelings that it can be used to create.

The gradual removal of clothing, such as baring the buttocks for CP, can be an extremely emotional and/or powerful experience. The exposure is important, but it is not necessarily sufficient to create the sense and atmosphere desired. Colin feels that “you've got to have this ritualisation of things. I hate these [videos] where... the speed with which they want to get people naked... The pleasure is lifting the skirt; the pleasure is... that gradual build-up. But maybe I'm just very old-fashioned”. For Colin, this “ritualisation” is a way of ensuring “you include all the elements that you want to include” so that the desired play-space can be brought into existence.

Being naked with another person, or people, who are fully clothed can create many different emotions, from shame at being stripped to an illicit sense of joy in violating

a norm so fundamental to contemporary society that we barely even recognise its presence. To be naked is also to be vulnerable, not only in terms of exposure to the gaze of others, but a physical vulnerability – the feeling of attention focussed on breasts protected by clothing is substantially different to the feeling of attention focussed on an exposed nipple, by a top with clamps or pegs in easy reach. There is also a powerful taboo against public nakedness, and some clubs do not allow total nudity. However, the clubs which most of my research participants referred to playing at have no such restriction. It is interesting to note here that these clubs, Playspace and Sweet Torments, also have the reputation of being ‘play clubs’, which means that the point in going to them is to participate in or watch public play. This is seen as a contrast to clubs with a fashion focus (such as Torture Garden) which may have space and equipment for play, but where those in attendance are less likely to be interested in using it. The distinction is also implied in the dress-code for Playspace: “The Dress Code is Fetish, but a minimum of Smart Black – no jeans or trainers... Our aim is for it to be a comfortable play environment. Therefore, your apparel is what makes you happy within these minimum standards.”¹² Playspace also includes in its guidelines for etiquette in a public play environment the need to remember that “nakedness and play can make people feel vulnerable”, so leering and commenting on someone's body is not appropriate behaviour.

The intimacy and vulnerability of nudity is such that some people, like cate, “don't do naked in public”. By contrast poppy says “I'll happily take all my clothes off in a club, as long as Barry is there... I'll do it happily. Because nobody cares. They'll still just chat to me, because I'm just me”. The fact that it is important to her that Barry is present is not insignificant; nudity in a play setting is an expression of relationship in that space. In public play-spaces tops rarely remove any clothing, and what is removed is a matter of

¹² <http://kinkyplayspace.com/welcome/> – accessed 19-Mar-16

practicality – the shoes which might interfere with balance, or the removal of a jacket to cool down. Given the ways in which nudity has been used as metaphorical vehicle for categorising human beings into civilised/savage, sane/insane, normal/deviant (Barcan, 2004) it is unsurprising that being naked in the presence of a fully clothed other can create a sense of hierarchy, functioning as a literal playing out of the power exchange taking place. Even within a private space relative amounts of clothing may still offer a marker of position and relationship within the scene, together with the wearing of items such as collars and cuffs. Nakedness or partial nakedness serves to emphasise the other ways in which the body is marked.

Marked Bodies

You [Michael] put that [mark] on me because you wanted too,
because you can, because I wanted you too and there it is.

– Molly

There's this beautiful moment that... there's this tight line and then
the blood that's coming out of the cut and they're not even, so
there's like curls, curls, little curls of blood along the cut. And you're
like 'oh, that's so fucking pretty!' It is hot, it's fucking hot.

– Madeleine

Many BDSM activities have the clear potential to leave marks on the skin. This is discussed with regard to the intimacy and relationship communicated and shaped by these marks in the next chapter, but it also bears discussion here since marks on the body, whether temporary or permanent, claim some of their meaning from their connection to subcultural identity. It is also interesting to note in this context that marks are, broadly

speaking, what creates criminality in the context of BDSM, the requirement being the creation of injuries which are more than transient or trifling.¹³

Bruises are the most common, but impression marks from ropes, raised welts and cuts are all possible; marks are unlikely to be displayed outside the context of play-spaces or play-relationships, although they are often referenced in wider conversation between Scene members. Temporary brands can be created with violet wands, but the BDSM world sometimes overlaps with the body modification subculture with permanent brands, scarification and tattoos being created during play and/or used to signal identity and relationship. It is not uncommon for Dominants to mark their submissives in some way, either as a complement too or instead of a collar. Less common, but not unknown, is for a Dominant to mark themselves as the owner of a submissive. Lifestyle couples may have matched or complementary markings: Molly and Michael have their hands tattooed – Molly has a lock and Michael a key, placed so that the tattoos touch when they hold hands. These kinds of mark are more likely to be visible outside of Scene contexts, rendering them potentially important markers of affiliation and identity even if their precise meaning is hidden from the ‘vanilla’ observer. Marks created by a top during play are distinguished from tattoos in legal terms for reasons which are not entirely clear.¹⁴

Relationship is also expressed through wearable items that mark and identify the body in a kink context. The clearest example is collars. Lifestyle submissives are often referred to as ‘collared’ and the process of play may entail for them a changing from their ‘day’ collar to a ‘play’ collar. For example, poppy wears a silver torc on a day-to-day basis which Barry removes for her when they play and replaces with a buckled leather one. Stoney-face showed me both his everyday chain-maille collar (which he was wearing but

¹³ The requirement for an injury to constitute ABH under the Offences Against the Person Act; first set out in *R v. Donovan* [1934] 2 KB 498 and cited as support for the convictions in the Spanner case

¹⁴ 1996. *R v Wilson*. *Cr App Rep*. Court of Appeal.

had permission to remove so he could show me clearly) and a wide leather one he described as his “full collar”, which had been made specially for him. When I met Molly she was wearing a wide black leather collar with everyday summer clothing. By contrast cate's ‘collar’ took the form of a lockable metal anklet.



10: Collars

In contrast to the kind of kink outfits that involve latex or corsetry, collars are worn during private play as well, and putting one on or changing it over can be an important signal of the opening of a play-space. There may be ritual elements attached to this – the submissive kneeling before the Dominant, or kissing the removed collar and/or its replacement. A submissive may not be allowed to remove their own collar, or may be physically unable to do so if it locks in some way. Describing an occasion of play at home, poppy remembered that “it was a lovely day so I just put a dressing gown on and we went out in the garden with a cup of tea and one of the builders turned up! And I still had my collar, and the proper cuffs and the ankle cuffs”. The significance of wearing the collar is amply illustrated by the fact that she “couldn't go and change because I'd still got my collar

on and Barry hadn't given me consent to take it off. So, I hid indoors for a while". Putting on everyday clothing while wearing her play collar was unthinkable to poppy, as the protocols through which she and Barry express the D/s aspects of their relationship forbade it. The likelihood that someone who was 'doing' kink rather than 'being' kinky would have rushed inside to change speaks to the meaning ascribed to collaring and the wearing of a collar for D/s couples.

Chapter Conclusion

Kink style can function as both a stereotype and a signal of kink identity; it can be an aspect of the performance of authenticity within this subculture and it can be evidence that a person is not 'really' kinky or is trying to express a kink persona that is not an expression of authentic identity. It is through such contestations of meaning in relation to mainstream culture and within the 'outsider' group that subcultures are constructed. The subcultural nature of the kink Scene, including expression through clothing choice, is one strand which can contribute to the sense of kink as gestalt for an individual or within their life. Personal identity and the freedom to choose it are of supreme importance in the hypermodern world, and yet at the same time people often want to feel accepted and part of something. A subcultural affiliation, with its overt and shared transgression of norms, expression of new values, active engagement/contestation with boundaries and potential for meaning-making might be said to offer a ready-made solution to this problem. But it is ready-made only if one is prepared to overlook the work involved in establishing the 'being' rather than the 'doing'. Stated and shared subcultural identity may be one strand contributing to the power and value of gestalt BDSM, but the experience of doing BDSM remains important and some forms of kink clothing contribute to that experience, and the creation of spaces for it. Even if we accept the being/doing distinction between the authentic kinkster and the tourist as a distinction which kinky people recognise, the

importance of the doing as an aspect of the being cannot be ignored. BDSM engaged in as “an end unto itself” creates authenticity, but it is authenticity that is found in and through “*experience*, rather than authenticity in... presentation to others” (Newmahr, 2011b pp.68, 72). It is this experience, somatic, multi-sensory and intimately relational, that will be considered in the next chapter.

9 – Kinky Bodies

God could not resist becoming flesh and experiencing such sensuality directly... For flesh needs no striving or fixing to be worthy of love, but is merely and easily holy itself.

— (Elizabeth aka Blessed_Harlot, 2011 p.81)

I began to understand that I could shift my perception about whatever was taking place. This was a major realisation. I recognised that I could stop the running of a scary story in my mind by not following the rising of my first thought. Instead of engaging in a mental story I allowed my body to relax, open and surrender to the whip. I allowed myself to feel my Master's energy move into and through me via the whip. Thoughts are terribly seductive but you don't have to identify with them.

— (slave Rick, 2009 p.128)

In the previous chapter kink was placed in the context of hypermodernity and considered as a subcultural identity. This chapter considers bodies involved in kink, an issue of importance partly because the body in hypermodernity can be seen as the “last remaining seat of the individuals control over one's own self” (Varga, 2005 p.229), but also because much of the perceived authenticity of a chosen subcultural identity is built around “perceptions of embodied competencies in particular practices” (Driver, 2011 p.980). The term bodies is not used in support of a distinction between body and mind, but rather a descriptor of a whole, living person. These are first-person bodies “that we know directly in the context or process of being alive... that we cannot take apart and put back together again... that is the centre and origin of our being in the world, [bodies] whose biological reality is neither separable from, nor a third person dimension of its lived and living presence” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b p.20). These “tactile-kinaesthetic/affective bodies, of

which our brains are an internal part” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2012 p.399) are the medium through which BDSM play is conducted, and so are intimately concerned with the potential gestalt nature of BDSM.

McLuhan’s (1964) observation that “the medium is the message” is generally seen as a reference to modern communications, but medium can be understood to mean anything from which change emerges (Federman, 2004). This is “not a bodiless milieu but a *substance* for the transmission of force, power and energy” (MacDonald, 2006 p.509), and therefore the messages it constitutes are similarly dynamic and complex. The message of a news broadcast is not the content of the stories, but the changes those stories create in public attitudes. Likewise, the message of BDSM play is not merely that some people enjoy inflicting and/or receiving pain, but the changes those experiences produce. These are changes founded in relationship; changes enacted with, between and through real, fleshy, multi-sensory, kinetic bodies. The experience of doing BDSM, competence in its practices, subcultural authenticity and the changes which result from this multi-faceted involvement are internalised by these real bodies. The result is an emergent sense of the whole, its shape, place and value for the individual: a gestalt. This sense is not a single thing that “exist’[s] in discourse as symbolic phenomena” but is constantly brought into being “in the embodied practices of participants as they connect their own lived histories to the present” (Driver, 2011 p.988).

This chapter therefore seeks to explore not what BDSM “*means*, but rather how it *feels*” (Driver, 2011 p.987), as the emergent message of gestalt braids together the space itself, the experiences created within it, the embodied knowledge of kink that is both deployed and created there and the “mysterious possibilities” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b p.21) for novelty which arise when the living body is awakened in an ongoing and embodied “process of becoming” (Driver, 2011 p.984).

Multi-Sensory Play Experience

When somebody's afraid their blood tastes different... If I cut his penis, the blood there is different because it's like engorged blood as opposed to flowing blood. It's been held there for a while. So, there is a difference in that, it's thicker. But I don't really notice a difference in the taste. But... when he's really afraid there's almost like a pepperiness.

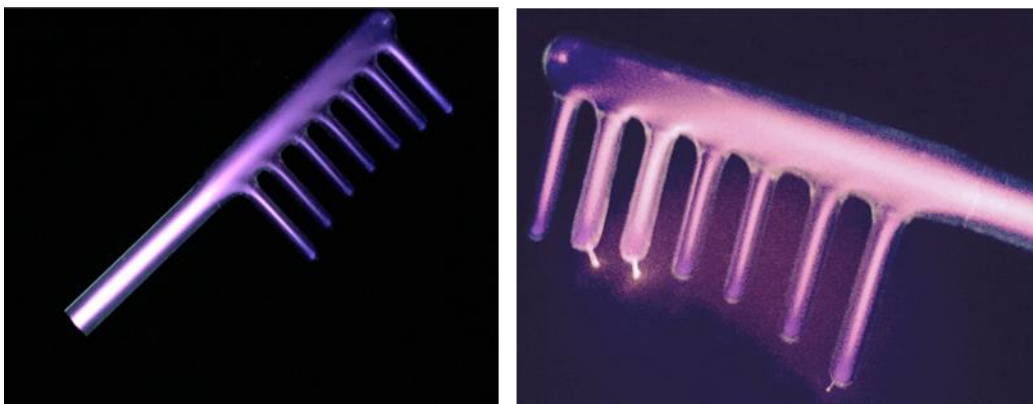
– Mistress Marina

Senses become heightened. So, your awareness of your own body becomes heightened and knowing what you're about to do to your body... There is no eerier feeling than laying there having someone put their hands on you for the first time, gloved up, about to mark where they going to put hooks, because all of a sudden that's the only area of your body that you feel.

– Stoney-face

A consideration of the body within a BDSM scene with attention given to only the most stereotypical forms of play reveals, nonetheless, a range of clear tactile sensations being created and used – from the sting of nerves struck suddenly with a hard object to the intimate stroke of skin on skin; from the pressure of rope, leather or metal around a limb to the resistance of pulling against confinement. A more in depth consideration calls forth many other possibilities: the sharp double-punch of a needle as it first penetrates, and then emerges from a pinch of skin; the cold clean edge of blade pressing tender flesh or the sudden flash of sensation when it slices through skin; the involuntary spasm of an electrified muscle; the weight of a swinging flogger as it resists the air, and the bone-deep vibration of impact; the tension of unprotected and anticipating flesh.

Other senses also contribute in many forms: the sound of whimpers and screams; the echoes and cracks of impacts; the buzzing electricity in a violet wand; white noise pumped through headphones; snapped commands, delighted laughter, the sudden echoing of respectful silence, or even the utterance safe-words. Then there are the smells and tastes created by the human body and the materials of toys and clothing – of leather, or rubber, or metal; subtler scents like the hot smell of candle-flame melting wax to drip onto undefended skin, or the whiff of ozone from a violent wand; the tang of disinfectant, or antiseptic; the salt and musk of sweat, or blood; the metallic taste of adrenaline. Senses might be restricted or manipulated with blindfolds, hoods, or tight-wrappings whilst suspension or partial suspension plays with balance and spatial awareness. There is the kinaesthetic sense: in the swing of an arm as it throws a flogger, or the precise measuring of pinched skin to insert a needle; in the tug of muscle against bindings or the protest of joints when they are prevented from shifting a long-held position. Movement also feeds the whole response of one body to another: in the driving forward of a bottom struck by a cane and the mute pushing back again for another stroke; in the sense of personal limits as distant, approaching and tested.



11: A violet wand powered up and in use on skin

Viewed from outside a scene, whether as an observer or recalling memories, it is possible to think through specific activities and identify individual sensory elements. But in the experience of play they are braided together, with each sense informing and

influenced by others. The possibility of singling out individual elements becomes more remote as the individuals become more immersed in the new world they are creating and sensory input becomes a more synaesthetic whole. The ways the many elements combine creates the possibility for different qualities of experience within a single activity, so that poppy can describe bondage both as comforting, “like somebody wrapping you up in a big warm duvet and a blanket and snuggling you all in”, and as something against which “I’ve fought and struggled and cried”.

Sensory input can break as well as shape the play-space if it occurs in the ‘wrong’ way. If bondage is intended to hold a person still to receive other sensations, then a stressful position or an ill-placed knot will interfere with their receptivity. By contrast, if the aim is to leave the bottom to endure predicament bondage then discomfort is an intended part of the whole. Even a slight sensation mistimed or placed wrongly can disrupt immersion into the play-space; there are times when a hair tickling the nose can be of greater concern than a cane striking the skin. Within the privacy of play at home, intrusive sensations are most likely to be of this kind, while play in the semi-public space of a club or party involves entering a space where the layout and content of the space is beyond the control of the top, and so carries the risk of different intrusive sensations. For example, Molly observed that she found it difficult to play in one particular club because “that room is really echoey and I do find myself being jarred out by noise there”. Aey also finds that the noise of public spaces can be distracting, especially the constant foot-traffic “if a play-space is put right by the loo door”. But there are other distractions too: “at some venues they put spotlights, and that’s just... absolutely hideous. First because you become like a spectator attraction, and second because it’s just so glaring” (Aey). These are issues unlikely to arise in a private play-space but they can also be addressed, to a degree, for her play partner with “a blindfold and white noise... to help him not be distracted.” Other distracting sensations may be harder for the Top to counter – if the entire room is cold for

example, or the design of the provided play equipment doesn't match the size and shape of the body being attached to it. Nevertheless, control over or restriction of the senses offers another tool for creating play-space, leaving the bottom with only the sensations the top chooses to allow. In its most extreme forms (such as mummification or immersion in a vacuum bed) a person is brought as close as possible to total immobility and sensory deprivation, although the materials being used to achieve this simultaneously constitute their own kind of sensory experience.

If it all works, the play-space is successfully created and the players immerse themselves into it. They are able not only to fully experience themselves as multi-sensory, kinaesthetic relational beings, but to be aware of their bodily existence in a way that is often inhibited or interrupted in the everyday world. The experience is a first-person one which "though implicitly known, is neither predictable... [nor] controllable" and the mysterious is encountered through "feeling and intuiting [the body's] transparencies" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b p.22).

Sensory-Kinetic Bodies

But I often say... when I'm talking and people are saying 'well, what do you want to do?' I don't necessarily know what I want to do, I know how I want to feel.

– Ivy

It is very sensual, but that's not the same thing [as sex]. Unfortunately, as screwed up as our society is, people confuse the two... It can be extremely sensual... Sensual is exploring things through the senses that we have, including an awareness of energy.

– Kyndyl

Embodiment is a term often used to indicate recognition that minds and bodies are not separate entities, but connected and interdependent. Sheets-Johnstone rejects this term as a “lexical band-aid” (2009a p.375), used by academics to give the impression of engaging with holistic entities without actually doing so. She argues the term communicates a mechanical body, made up of component parts; this biological entity “whose aliveness is something we know through tests and measurements” is contrasted to the living body “whose aliveness is something of which we are qualitatively aware” (2009b p.26). Aliveness is not a state or condition the body is in but the sole mode of being a body has.

The concept of the mechanical body arises from a perspective which bases thinking on the idea of matter that is real. This matter makes up objects that really exist, leading to the idea that “my body is a thing I call mine” (LaMothe, 2015 p.17). In such an epistemology, matter is accessible to bodily senses and obeys material laws. This makes it accessible to the human mind in that it can be measured, added to, taken apart, polluted and so on. Movement thus comes to be understood as the thing which happens to matter when some sort of force acts upon it – the location of the matter changes but the substance of the thing so moved does not. Placing the idea of embodiment within this paradigm creates the “motorology” Sheets-Johnstone (2009a p.394) wishes to challenge, a view of the body as a mechanical sensorimotor system with the capacity to respond in a range of different ways to stimuli.

LaMothe addresses the challenge by proposing a new paradigm of movement. She observes that the materialist paradigm effectively undermines itself as “if matter is that which ‘resists change’ then ‘change’ is the norm. Change is changing, and matter changes change by resisting it. Matter exists as a variation of movement” (2015 p.22); in other words movement is the defining characteristic of matter. Sheets-Johnstone similarly views

animation as the foundational aspect of life. Everything that is alive moves, and not just in the macro sense, but at the cellular level. It makes sense therefore to consider bodies in relation to lived-through experiences that “are dynamic through and through and whose dynamics resonate in bodily-felt spatio-temporal-energetic experiences”(2009a p.397).

That BDSM utilises movement in the macro sense is clear; an implement cannot be used by an immobile body. But movement extends beyond the deliberate, controlled exercise of muscles; every sense is enabled by tiny movements within the body, down to the microscopic level, so that movement is the foundation to all perception and all experience (LaMothe, 2015, Sheets-Johnstone, 2009a). If this perspective of bodily movement as the “source, medium and telos of all matter and reality” (LaMothe, 2015 p.34) is adopted, then movement becomes more than a response to stimuli (as in wincing reflexively from the stroke of a cane) and becomes instead the way new things are known and learned. The sensory awareness of the body creates, responds to and engages in “co-ordinated pattern[s] of moving into the world, being moved by whatever one's movements enable, moving in relation to what appears, and in the process becoming ‘one’ who has moved and been moved in this way” (2015 p.32). BDSM play is a process of laying down such kinetic patterns of sensation and response: patterns which combine to create a new world; patterns which create, shape and enhance relationship and intimacy; patterns which illuminate the complexity and ambiguity of physical sensation; patterns which feed the making of the self and inform knowing, thinking, feeling and doing; patterns which contribute to the creation of gestalt.

These patterns are kinetic in their very nature; they are not visual, fixed or static but exist only within “the multidimensional sensory space of a bodily self as a potential to move” (LaMothe, 2015 p.4). Once such potential is realised and a particular movement made, the person becomes a person who “has made that movement, who can make that

movement, who knows she has made and can make that movement” (LaMothe, 2008 p.583), and who can then use it to find a range of sensory experience and expression that otherwise would have remained unknown. While LaMothe's interest is dance, any movement has the potential to form a part of this bodily becoming, provided the sensory awareness created by the movement is used as a guide to create and become patterns of sensation and response that realise the potential to move. Practices which enable this process can be a “life-enabling source of human thinking, feeling and acting... [with] the power to generate new experiences and ideas about what it means to be human” (2008 p.584). I suggest that BDSM is one such a practice.

Body Knowledge

It's never going to work [trying to recreate a scene]. I could never even try because it's down to how I'm feeling on the day. How I'm feeling about my body, my mind, my emotions. How that person is. To get that combination, of 30 or 40 different strands... it's just impossible... How could you get that? You'd be going against the flow.

– Cee

As the process of play unfolds the multi-sensory experiences it creates are internalised and stored as patterns of sensation and response, which feed future play. This ‘body knowledge’ is not simply mentally filed in cognitive drawers labelled *How Bodies Work, What You Can Make Them Do, or How Sensation Y Affects Person X*. The tops with whom I spoke were in general agreement that planning (in a cognitive structured sense) is only the foundation of a good scene, with the rest of it being a process where “everyone's got to be flowing together” (Cee). That process is built on many things: connection between the participants, past experience, and physical, mental and emotional states. All

these can change, not just from scene to scene but from moment to moment. “As much as you may discuss something in advance, when you actually get to it... either your mood or the subs mood has changed slightly. It doesn't need to change much... Within seconds [during play] people can and do... their physical sensitivities can change in either direction. And what is acceptable now can be totally unacceptable in less than a minute's time. And on other occasions sub-space makes the opposite true, where you have to be conscious that what's acceptable now is very pleasant but that doesn't mean to say you've got a license to do it another time” (Barry).

Patterns of sensation and response are created through practice, allowing the patterns to be internalised and new forms to emerge. A novice is likely to regard the activity in which they are engaged as a progression of “distinctive, successive steps”, and the aim of their practising is to achieve instead “an arc of embodied techniques” (O'Connor, 2007 pp.129, 130), so that the participants connect fully with one another and the play can flow intuitively.

Successful BDSM play combines these well-practiced physical skills with knowledge both about the body in general and of the specific bodies involved. But this is only part of the story; if it were all then I could adequately describe BDSM experiences by stating that a cane will feel different to a flogger, and the person you are playing with might like one more than the other. Even if this is not obvious to someone who has never felt either implement, noting it does not communicate any real sense of the lived experience and the enriched knowledge of the body which may result from it. It is not simply that objectively different implements must feel different to the recipient because they are of different shapes and from different materials; two different leather floggers can also create distinct sensations. A given implement might even feel different to the same person on different days, or at different points within a scene. This is affected by factors like: state of mind;

what (if any) play has preceded using that implement; expectations of the scene; skill and personal technique of the person wielding the implement; how comfortable the wielder is using it; the angle at which they approach the bottom; the position the bottom is in; whether the bottom can move and whether they do; whether there are other sensations to distract or compete with the impact; whether anyone else is present and whether the players know they are there; the time of day; temperature; the part of the body being struck; the frequency of the blows; whether either party has spaced. In sum, successful BDSM play is not just a matter of prior knowledge and reflective practice, but continual two-way communication and connection throughout the scene as it is played out.

To attempt the challenge of languaging this experience does not mean to “determine scientifically ‘what it is like to be that body’” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009a p.390). A play experience is dynamic, and fluid and in such a context “everyday language is clumsy and inadequate” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b p.363), giving precedence to what is stable and reifiable (LaMothe, 2015, Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b). Attempting to describe a qualitative whole requires more than accounting for each individual element, with the casual assumption that the meaning of each label is clearly fixed and defined; it must also signal a recognition of the “multiple qualities of movement combined – tensional, linear, areal and projectional qualities, all in one complex whole” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b p.366).

Attempting description of lived experience thus requires more than the simple equation of physical perception plus cognition (in relation to particular stimuli). A description given in words must recognise the experiential elements beyond or outside the words. Such a description is not the experience itself. It cannot recreate it for an audience, and it may not utilise words everyone will find equally valid and relatable to their own experience. Instead, a description intended to do justice to the complexity and ambiguity of a lived experience uses words in ways which attempt to communicate with the store of

non-linguistic knowledge and somatic memory in the audience, enabling them to add the dimensions which words cannot capture in ways which resonate within their own experience of the world. The process of crafting such a description can also contribute to personal reflection on and understanding of the experience it depicts; almost a third of my research participants spoke of writing about their play experiences as a means of grasping what happened and what it means for them.

In the space of lived experience “everything comes together... subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious” (Soja, 1996 p.57). This Thirdspace brings together the realities of the perceived (physical), conceived (mental) and lived (social) (Soja, 1996). Recognising space, and experience in it, as “simultaneously real and imagined and more” (Soja, 1996 p.11) makes the complexity of experience evident. The simplest movement of a dynamic living body is, from a Thirdspace perspective, not an act but “a quite particular rippling-through-the-body kinetic dynamic” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2012 p.395).

Different concepts of experience make possible distinct descriptions of the same event. By way of illustration I will describe a single example of play in two ways. The first utilises that equation of perception-plus-cognition, seeking to give a detached, reifiable account. The second draws on the Thirdspace perspective in an attempt to communicate a sense of the event which goes beyond a set of propositional statements:

Caning as Perception-plus-Cognition

A cane is a long flexible stick, usually made from rattan, that is most commonly used across the buttocks. It requires some skill to wield effectively and without causing damage, since the furthest end travels much faster than the end being gripped. When it strikes, it compresses the narrow strip of flesh

immediately underneath it, with a corresponding upwards push of the flesh on either side. This is visible in the classic 'tramline' marks of a cane-stroke, the stretching of the skin on either side of the impact creates a double line of bruising with a narrow, less-marked strip of flesh in between. The nerves compressed by the blow send signals to the brain, but almost immediately the cane rebounds off the flesh again. The compressed flesh decompresses and the nerves in it also respond to that. The physical sensation is thus twofold: first the impact and then the decompression, milliseconds apart. The latter sensation is more diffused and likely to last longer, as the restoration of normal blood flow is less immediate than its interruption. This sensation may make someone want to rub their skin as it stings or prickles. A caner wanting to create a peak of sensation may try to time the next stroke to the mid-point of this prickling. Each stroke is ideally delivered in a slightly different place. This reduces the risk of breaking the skin, but is also desirable because repeated hits on one spot will ultimately become less rather than more intense for the recipient. Once the blood can flow again it flows faster in the attempt to create swelling, and so minimise further injury. As the caning progresses the skin becomes hard in patches and feels differently textured. The receiver may cry out, twitch, stand up or make other physical responses. The top will need to decide when to end the caning, which may also be the end of the scene. It is possible that the sensations build up to a point of crescendo, providing a natural end to the process that, to an observer, may look like an orgasm being experienced by the caned person (Easton and Hardy, 2004, Moser, 1998). However, not every scene goes this way; it might

end with tears from the caned person, they might reach sub-space or the caner may simply decide the time is right for a different activity.

All of this is knowledge *about* the body, combined with the kind of knowledge *of* the body that cognition about perception can give. But it has little to say about the felt experience – as either pleasant or painful – and nothing at all about how the participants incorporate the experience into their embodied processes of becoming (Driver, 2011). It is this experience of “bodies-in-process” (Driver, 2011 p.985) that builds into what LaMothe calls a “rhythm of bodily becoming”, the laying down of patterns of sensation and response that allow a person to “express and unfold through these movements their own individual human bodily potential for creating and becoming themselves and their worlds” (2008 p.583).

To approach this element of creating and becoming in relation to the experience of caning it is necessary to focus on a single person's experience. The intention here is not to provide a generalisable description of caning, but to illustrate how an individual might engage with the whole experience. To do this in sufficient depth I offer an account of my own experience:

Caning as Real-and-Imagined

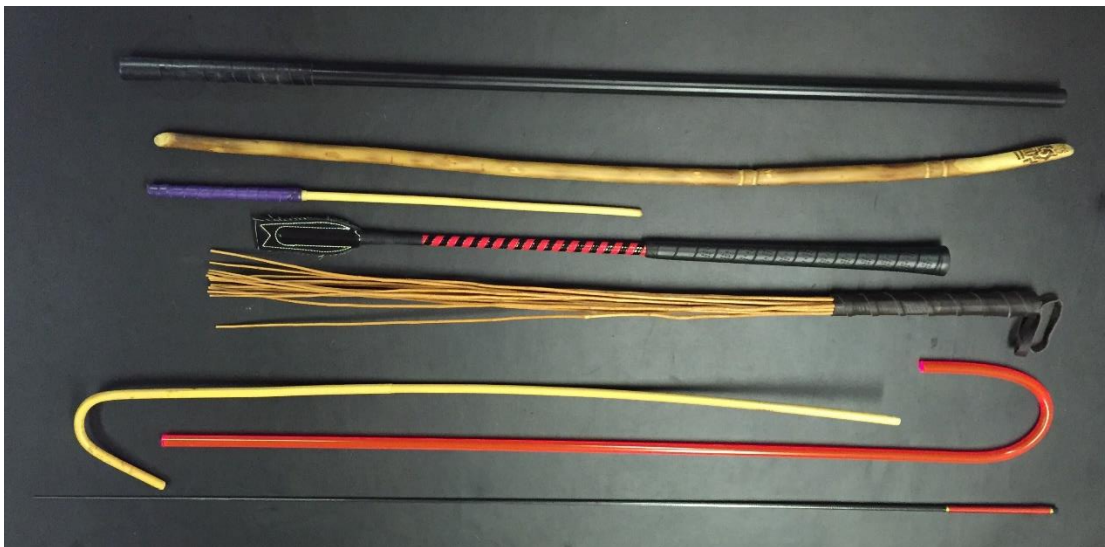
The cane hits my skin. That first impact is absorbed easily and gone, I'm not sure I even register it consciously, although I know it must be there. But it leaves a trail. The sting remains, and each stroke adds to it. Building, not outwards towards dissipation and vanishing, but inwards. It sinks and spreads into my body, singing its way into my blood and my bones and beyond. This is pain and not-pain, delight and fear. Some strokes now take my breath, trapping it in my throat for an instant with the purity of the pain and the rush of joy and the fizzing of it through nerve after nerve after nerve. It is pain, it

hurts. But it is not-pain because it is good-hurting. This pleasure-pain swirls through me, bubbling, dancing. It doesn't disperse, but trembles there on the edge of being gone, waiting for the next stroke to join it. Singing a new note in the harmony, a new beat to the dance. As each stroke arrives and joins the rest the trembling grows stronger, not just inside now but running through my muscles. I quiver. It is still fragile, it could be gone – a wrapped stroke would break it, although not irreparably.¹⁵ A loss of balance or the movement of whatever is supporting me would shatter it. But if it lasts, if it builds stroke on stroke, in the end all those trembling notes will explode back outwards, turning me inside out, exploding me through my own skin and out into the universe.

This is not simply knowledge *of* my body, or knowledge *about* my body. Or even a combination of the two. It is knowledge that I am body, body is me. In those few moments there is no 'I' from whose perspective I can speak. The subjective self is shattered by "a context in which delight and pain are not readily distinguishable" (MacKendrick, 1999 p.146). The immediate aftermath is a gradual collecting together, putting what is 'meant' to be on the inside back on the inside. This takes a while: perceptions are skewed, language is a nonsense, moving my body (mine again, not me) is something requiring thought, conscious thought. But I find my body beautiful in this process. It is not beauty in the sense of being aesthetically pleasing but a beauty that comes from knowing in my flesh what it is that I am. Through this subject-shattering experience I learn that my "flesh may surpass... subjectivity" (Mackendrick, 1999 p.108). The 'I' in my brain is not all that there is, and 'my' perspective from 'in there' is not all that I can know. I am not trapped in a shell of flesh. My physical being is not a burden to be borne or an unruly thing to be tamed,

¹⁵ Where the end of the cane extends too far and flicks the hip bone

trained, shaped and used. In the real-and-imagined space created by those cane strokes, I am body and body is me; I have become a person who has been beyond the subjective self, and who knows that I have done that and that I can do that.



12: Canes, crops and birches

As Sheets-Johnstone observes “each experience is what it is” (2009a p.390), and it is not language. The body in play is thinking in and through movement, not words. It is not a symbol-making body, or seeking to mediate the world through language. It is an “existentially resonant body... [which] creates a particular dynamic world with no intermediaries” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b p.35). Although the powerful reality of that can only be partially captured in words it remains a felt truth which contributes to the value of kink and its status as a gestalt.

Bodies in pain?

Flogging my shoulders will cure a bad headache, better than an aspirin... So, if I get a really bad headache... and if we're not rushed for time I'll say 'is there any chance of a quick flogging please?' And it's superb, and that will go.

– poppy

I like the thought of pain. [But] not always. Depending on my mood depends on how much pain I can actually take or want. So for instance [one time] I were, not quite bleeding, but I were definitely hurt, a lot. And I were like 'fucking carry on! Nyer-nyer-ny-nyer-nyer!'... And I were black and blue with stripes... And then on other days it's like somebody even strokes me, and I'll be 'Grrr... let's just put the rope on and pretend'.

– Rita

The assumption that BDSM must involve the deliberate creation of physical pain is sufficiently entrenched that people use 'Sadomasochism' (SM) or 'Sadism and Masochism' (S-and-M) to stand as an indicator for the entire Scene, and all practices within it. That this is an over-simplification should by this point be clear. Labels such as sadist and masochist are felt to be of limited use within the Scene. Aey describes their inadequacy in this way: "when you go down the high street you see the signs and it says chemist, and it says butcher and it says bakery. And you know that there is meat in one, there's bread in another and there's drugs in the other. But when you go in you find out that one is a Boots, and it doesn't really have much medicine but gift sets. The butcher is Halal, so it doesn't have any pork and the bakery only sells bread but no cakes... Even though there's labels you still have to go inside to see what's there". That complexity notwithstanding, the idea of pain offers an opportunity to delve more deeply into the engagement with sensation that occurs during play.

The International Association for the Study of Pain's influential definition of pain as an "unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage" (1976-77) locates the experience of pain firmly within the realm of the physical body (Bourke, 2014). It also tells us that the essential experience of pain is unpleasant, that one can only be in pain if one is aware of it as pain, and that pain is a

function of the nervous system. Bourke observes that this view of pain arises largely from the development of evolutionary science during the nineteenth century, and that it has continued to develop as medical research perfects the technology to see the brain as it is working. For modern medicine “pain is the brain’s response to noxious stimuli or, more correctly, it is the response of certain regions of the brain to nociception...This extreme reductionism identifies a millisecond of brain activity as pain” (Bourke, 2014 p.10). It should also be noted here that cultural discourses about pain shape the moral context of experiences of pain: if pain is wholly a noxious experience then the act of choosing pain can justifiably be considered pathological. This perception is something of which most kinky people are acutely aware.

To approach a kink-relevant understanding of pain we need to reject the idea that pain has a “definite ontological presence” and instead regard it as a type of event, a specific form of “one of those recurring occurrences that we regularly experience and witness that participates in the constitution of our sense of self and other” (Bourke, 2014 p.5). Following Scarry’s (1985) influential work pain is often portrayed as uniquely resistant to language. But, even if pain is not uniquely hard to frame in words, language remains problematic because pain is less an intrinsic nature of a raw sensations and more the way in which those sensations are experienced. Pain is invented as it is encountered, in a process which involves the entirety of our lived experiences: our physiological senses, our emotional states, our cognitive structures, our place within our various communities, our cultural and social expectations and values and so on. It is never simply the response of nerves to noxious stimuli but a contextualised quality of an experience (Robertson and Wildcroft, 2016).

The complexity of pain experience in kink is reflected in my conversation with Molly, quoted here at length:

Molly: [Masochism is] interesting. That's a word that I have struggled with. I don't identify with it as a label and yet I do know that that is something that I can be. So... the thing for me that I really get off on is not necessarily the pain in the moment, it's the marks afterwards; ... it's what's left behind; it's the marks on my skin. So, I know that I will really grit my teeth and bear pain beyond pleasure-pain to get the marks that I will get off on. I currently have got the remains of a belt mark here on my thigh and that's... I will [pause] I'm not keen on the word endure because that makes it sound like something I don't really want to do, but I will certainly kind of grit my teeth and say 'go on do it'... because I want that mark afterwards. I want it.

Alison: So some kinds of pain are pleasurable?

Molly: Yes.

Alison: And then there are other kinds of pain which you definitely experience as pain but...?

Molly: There's a reward.

Alison: And you... I don't want to say struggle with, because it doesn't sound like a struggle...

Molly: I'll psych myself up for it.

Alison: You grapple with it?

Molly: Yes

Alison: And you kind of ride it, because you get something else out of it?

Molly: Yes. Yeah. I think that's a fairly good way to say it. But there certainly is pleasurable pain. For me that is thud. Deep, deep thud... [This paddle]

delivers this thud inside me. For me that thud, real heavy flogging, that really deep heavy thud where you get that kind of deep bruise inside your muscles, that is my real pleasure-pain. Although I will say that the vampirey gloves, kind of spikey things, also give me pleasure-pain.¹⁶ The pain which I will ride and endure, for want of a better word, because I know it will get me marks, is stingy stuff. Really stingy pain for me is pain. I can't find the pleasure place in that pain. But thud is the pain for me. Although... I don't even think of it as painful. Also knife play, which we will do so that it leaves real welts and even so it will nick the skin, that's not pain for me. That's pleasure.

As this fragment of conversation indicates, pain can be felt and understood in different ways. Digging below the labels of 'sadist' or 'masochist' is something many people in the kink scene do, as they seek to reconcile the medicalised language and its negative connotations with the complexity and joy of their experiences. Pain sensations are most likely to be experienced by the bottom partner during play, and 'service topping' (where the top acts on the instructions of the bottom) was not represented among my research participants. This means those people who bottom or switch are the more likely to have reflected on the direct experience of pain, and its relationship to the experience of pleasure. The individual is actively engaged with their experience of pain, challenging the assumption that pain is only a cause of action and positioning it instead as a kind of action in itself (Asad, 2000). Not all bottoms identify with the term masochist and, even among those that do, their experience is not understood as simply as enjoying the pain. Instead they engage actively with it in a manner Asad describes as a "process of structuring" (2000 p.41) the experience. Asad's example draws on the use of metaphoric descriptions of pain

¹⁶ Leather gloves studded with sharp pins

as musical notes or numerical value, and argues that this is not necessarily making the experience “meaningful” but it is contributing to the process of “living painful relations” (2000 p.43). My research participants rarely used such direct metaphors in relation to their experiences, but they nonetheless engage in such processes of structuring pain, as the following examples illustrate:

There are people who speak of surrendering to pain, feeling it as it is, without judgement. As pussikin describes: “if you give in to that sensation, stop thinking ‘god that hurts’ and start actually feeling it... then all of you is really there, you know what I mean – you’re not thinking about what it feels like, you’re actually feeling what it feels like and you don’t need to analyse it or question it, there’s just... everything that you are, right there”.

Or they speak of struggling with pain, striving to hold it and wrestling with its power to overwhelm, seeking the triumph of not being destroyed by it: “I don’t get off on pain itself but I get off on the emotions that surround it. I get off on being able to push myself, on being able to push my body to do something it’s never done before, to go further than it’s ever gone before” (Rosie); “I work on the basis that I don’t like being caned but I like *having been* caned... I like the feeling of knowing that I’ve taken whatever has been given to me... so there’s a pride element to it” (Will).

Or they speak of submitting to pain that is given to them, as an expression of service, commitment or love: “I can take an awful lot of pain and its... all to do with my head-space though. I mean he can dish out... as much as he can dish out to me and I will continue to take it. It’s because in my head... the pain brings pleasure. But knowing that it’s pleasing him to see me taking this is more pleasure for me” (cate). Madeleine describes this kind of processing of the pain as like “transubstantiation”, even though “I try very hard not to use Catholic language”. The term fits the experience because what happens during play is that “you’re turning this very quotidian physical pain into – or humiliation or tears –

but you're turning it into something... as an offering. So, who are you offering it to? I have no idea. The minute that I could answer that I would be a happier person!" She has considered this from the sadist's perspective too, and suggests their involvement in this process is twofold: "one is that you're enabling or bringing about this transition but number two – you're sacrificing your humanity to do it".

Or they speak of embracing pain, delighting in it because the sensations are, or can become, pleasurable. Madeleine says "I hate the cane and I love the cane. But for me pleasure is mental. So the physical sensation is pure pain... I'm not a pain slut. But the submission to the pain is intensely pleasurable, mentally, to the point where I may be feeling pain but I get incredibly sexually excited at the same time". Rosie describes pain and pleasure as a spectrum saying "actually they can be the same thing... If you compare it to sexuality, one side is straight, one side is gay, middle is bisexual. So, a bit of pain, a bit of pleasure... equally there's varying severities of pain and varying intensities of pleasure".

Or they speak of enduring pain, of holding it within them or weathering it as it flows over and through them, accepting it as the state in which they exist for those moments, or even of experiencing it as terrible but delighting in it after the event. Ivy says "some of the things that I do I get pleasure out of having done them rather than out of doing them at the time". Endurance of pain might also create something else that is important or desirable, as when Molly says she will accept pain that is not directly enjoyable to achieve the marks which are. Colin describes using the structured pain of kink to bring about the cessation of unsought pain from an arthritic knee: "Before I had my... knee done I was walking bone on bone, and it was hell. I had an absolutely superb thrashing and I was pain free for six hours. Absolutely pain free". The context and nature of the space also contributes to the experience of sensation, as Stoney-face describes: "I do not like pain... [but] I've kind of, sort of parked myself in the kink scene really by doing

hook suspensions, especially three now... Because tell anybody you don't like something in kink and they go 'but you do hook suspensions!'" He explains the difference is that during play "I'm not getting the endorphin rush that masochists feel. My brain shuts it off. But in hook suspensions I get that rush, I get that masochistic rush of endorphins... Because I'm approaching it from a ritualistic aspect and because this particular hook suspension tradition for myself is Sundance related. And the Sundance was my flesh sacrifice for the rest of the tribe".

All these are processes of structuring pain into lived experience, some of which enable pain to be transformed into something else, and some of which give meaning to the pain. But all support the view that pain is a field of experience largely constituted in the interplay of sensation and context. It arises and is lived differently according to the background field and immediate history of the sensation, whether mundane life or peak experiences. Marie speaks for many so-called masochists when she observes "I stubbed my toe the other day, and it was horrible, and I was swearing. And I was thinking 'how is this that just one knock gets me swearing and yet I can bend over and have someone beat me repeatedly and love it?'" I suggest it is because there is no pain without the crucible of context (Robertson and Wildcroft, 2016). Pain is a powerful sensation which cannot but "break the order of things" (Glucklich, 2001 p.76) but when it is met and engaged with it can constitute not just the unmaking of worlds (Scarry, 1985) but their remaking in the knowledge of ourselves as people who have encountered pain and not been destroyed by it. Glucklich suggests that the "efficacy of pain" deliberately chosen derives from its bridging of "'raw' sensation with our highest qualities as human beings in a community of other humans" (2001 p.44), and in BDSM play the process of somatic and relational meaning-making inherent in the process of creating and experiencing sensations including pain constitutes such a bridge. In sum, the active engagement with pain that occurs in BDSM play allows for the transformation both of the pain and of relationship with it. The

sensation is cast into the crucible of experience and personal and spiritual rewards can thus be distilled (Robertson and Wildcroft, 2016).

Intimately Marked Bodies

It's like the best thing in the world is to bear a decent bruise... there's pride, genuine pride.

– Rita

Marks are important. I like nothing better than looking at them the next day. Absolutely marks are important. But I don't want things that will inhibit me for future play.

– Colin

These different engagements with pain lead me to return briefly to the issue of marked bodies that was addressed in the previous chapter. Here the issue is of marks inscribed into the flesh itself by the performance of relationship that occurs during play. There is an overlap; mention was made of tattoos as markers of identity and/or subcultural belonging, and body-art or body-modification can fuzzy the boundaries of what is play and not play, kink and not kink. Griff explained to me that he does a lot of cuttings and brandings, some of which take place in a play setting. He is interested in the visual aesthetic of the work because “I want to make a pretty picture”, but also in the physical process of creating – “I want to see how it heals... I design things with the process in mind. It's not just a pretty picture, it is the fact that I am either branding this in skin or cutting this in skin. But if I'm doing that, which is great, I don't want someone to end up, if it scars, I don't want them to end up with a nasty looking thing going ‘look at this, man, it's like I've been attacked by a tiny bear!’”. While the cutting or brand is never just a pretty picture the experience of creating it is different in play and non-play settings. When carrying out this sort of body art for people with whom he does not want to play he says “I'm not sure how

to describe it better than the words, or the term, 'intellectual hard-on'. I get off on that in a very... almost a rational way where I sit there and I go 'this is awesome!'" By contrast, if he is in a play context, "I like playing with it [blood]... Yeah, give it a nice smack when you're done. Then you grab the paint-brushes and you make a picture right, that's what you do!" This kind of play is intimate, and Griff recognises that "there's lots of people that want cuttings and there's not a lot of people that I want to be doing that play with"; performing cuttings and brandings as a form of body modification for people within the kink world allows him to "just sort of explore that fascination" that breaking and broken skin holds for him without always entering into that intimate relationship.

More firmly within the world of play is cutting for the sensation, for blood and/or the associated emotions, rather than to deliberately create scars and marks. Madeleine describes cutting as "a much more intense journey" than other kinds of play, but she observes that the "weirdest thing about it is that it's very fast... The actual act itself it's like 'ok, done.'" She gets an "incredible, incredible endorphin rush from seeing [her own] blood", and so she prefers to "be cut somewhere I can see. I want to see the person, and I want to see them cutting me and I want to see what, where I'm being cut". This is not only about the enjoyment of seeing the blood. As with Griff, she finds this to be an incredibly intimate act, saying that part of the emotion around allowing someone else to open her skin is the fear that "they won't be there. I know that sounds strange, but don't go. Don't leave. They will have to become something else to do this, and [the fear is] that they will distance themselves from you and your body as they're doing it. So, for my part it's incumbent on me to not let them. I won't let them depart. If you're going to do this, you've got to be here".

Another of my research participants, Mistress Marina, describes how "I always suck the blood. So, it's like you're linked at that point by those things. And you couldn't get

any closer than cutting someone and drinking their blood... I think that's where the vampire thing comes in, that's so romanticised. Because I think that, at a very base level people know that doing that is the most intimate you can be". The connection forged by this intimacy was brought home to her when her romantic partner was upset to discover that she had cut another submissive, even though he was happy for her to play with other people, "because he said it was our thing and that I shouldn't have done it with other people". Michael and Molly also achieve blood in their play, not through cutting but through impact and the use of vampire gloves. Michael describes how, when he has finished, he sends Molly to find a mirror, and "that's an interesting version of when sub-space hits, because it hasn't happened until [she's] gotten there... I've seen her do that with the blood, where I've made her bleed and she touches it or I touch it and show it to her and it's just [clicks fingers]". Molly describes this as becoming "shut down. It's just me, blood, fingers. It's all kind of [pause] yeah. So, I will be drifting off in the mirror for a while. Touching and looking, touching and looking". The blood, as with other marks that Michael creates on Molly's body, are a visible sign of their relationship – "he's painted his desire and his lust on me and it's this real visual mark of... what I am to him, of our relationship, of his desire and lust and need for me".

Probably the most common form of marks are those created by the various forms of impact play, which range from the distinctive lines of a cane stripe to a more generalised mottled bruising from flogging. Many bottoms delight in these marks, reacting as Bea describes: "as soon as I have any marks... I tend to jump up and down in front of the mirror going 'I want to see', 'I want to see', 'I want to see!'". Her partner Dee observes that "unfortunately when we get to the point where it's likely to start marking we're also getting close to [Bea's] limit", and this may be partly why marks have value for some. Rosie says "I get off on being able to push myself, on being able to push my body to do

something it's never done before, to go further than it's ever gone before... It gives me a real kind of emotional buzz and satisfaction. That's why I love marks."

Suchet understands the body as "an ever-emerging, unfinished project whose meaning is acquired through symbolic gestures" (2009 p.114). The literal creation of marks on flesh is perhaps not best described as symbolic. Nonetheless marks clearly have both meaning and value, in keeping with views of the body as a site for exploring subjectivity and creating identity. To Suchet's summary I would add that the body is also a site for exploring intersubjectivity and relationality, an issue from which much academic work on the body is detached (Furey, 2012). As the accounts of my research participants show, BDSM play (and perhaps especially making marks) creates and relies upon a deep intimacy between players and the inherent relationality of bodies. Furey argues that it is necessary to find a way to connect both the 'inner' experience and the 'outer' environment within a relational context and an exploration of BDSM play offers an opportunity to do so.

The Medium and the Message

I think, you know your adrenaline starts pumping and that doesn't make you a rational creature... adrenaline really does excise rational thought and it's one of the pleasures of this that it really does suspend your rational thought. It allows you to escape it.

– Madeleine

It's like most of the time something's cut off, because it has to be so that you can do life-stuff – if you usually experienced things so intensely you'd never get anything done! But when you're playing

you can let yourself really touch what the world is like and how it interacts with your body.

– pussikin

The limited social demography available on kinky people, arising mostly from researchers observations of the communities in which they conducted their research, suggests that the Scene is predominantly made up of white middle-aged members of the professional classes (Weiss, 2011) who have an affiliation with “geekiness” (Newmahr, 2011b p.30). Kinky people also apparently tend to be “rather intellectual” (MacKendrick, 1999 p.153), and it is perhaps telling of the hypermodern dominance of mind over body that Mackendrick cautions against regarding this observation as a suggestion that people turn to kinky means of using the body because they are unable to use their brains. Indeed, several my research participants spoke of the power of kink to “suspend your rational thought” (Madeleine) for a while. For someone who tends to “live in my brain a lot” (Ivy), BDSM play can help them feel “a lot more corporeal. It connects the two, I think” (Ivy).

The difficulty of speaking meaningfully about the experiences of play arises not from any lack of facility with language but because experience is created by (and understood in) the body, and the sometimes overwhelming nature of experiencing counterpleasures is able to rupture subjectivity. These pleasures, that are “edgy and strange... delight[ing] in the existence of boundaries, that they may be broken and overleapt; in the establishment of limits, that they may be surpassed” (MacKendrick, 1999 p.17), queer understanding of terms like pleasure and pain and so rupture language even as they use it. Weiss however disagrees that subjectivity is ruptured by BDSM play, arguing instead that the “bodily experiments” it involves “rely on technique and knowledge of the body, which have everything to do with self-mastery and community production, rather than transcendence... [the body] as an object of knowledge and cultivation, rather than

desubjectification” (2011 p.140). I suggest both stances are partially correct; body knowledge is vital to successful play, but it is not just knowledge *of* a body, even of one's own body. Neither is it knowledge *about* the body. It is a somatic knowledge that is not stable, not static, not visual or linguistic but grounded in movements we make, which also make us (LaMothe, 2015). In this, MacKendrick (1999) is correct that there may well be no ‘I’ from whose perspective the experience might be described. Language is ruptured, because play is not primarily concerned with language, but with sensation, emotion and animate living bodies in which every cell and system is constantly moving and contributing. This subsequently enables us to think the things we think and, if we moved differently, we would think something else (LaMothe, 2015). Such a dynamic event cannot be reduced to a word or a series of words, however complex and careful.

Successful BDSM is a somatic, multi-sensory, kinaesthetic process, one in which an arc of embodied techniques is employed to forge an intimate relationship. To create this arc successfully the “non-separation of thinking and doing” is essential (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009b p.30). This is achieved through practice, which does not create the “different world” of more fluent play. But rather, once fluency is available, the possibility of “thinking in movement [as] a way of being in the world... taking it up moment by moment and living it directly in movement” (2009b p.35) arises. Sheets-Johnstone observes that this is thinking performed by “an existentially resonant body” rather than a “symbol-making body” which mediates the world only through language (2009b p.35); this allows for the recognition that having meaning is not synonymous with having a verbal label. She observes that an improvised dance might be read by an observer as “standing for something”, while from the perspective of the dancer it is the dynamic processes of the dance which matter: “in *this evenings dance*, a particular movement is not ‘about’ something any more than a smile is about pleasure” (2009b p.33). This observation that translates easily and naturally to the process of BDSM play – what matters in the performance of play is that play continues to

flow. Whatever meaning that flow holds for the players is not readable in terms of symbols, or captured in a breaking down of components. It is grasped in the flesh and expressed through the flesh, and it can only be approached from the perspective of the whole because it is an emergent property of the component parts, not another strand being woven in.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has explored the bodily experience of play, and the ways in which these are woven into personal understandings of BDSM. The difficulties of describing experience, and the processes of structuring them into living relationship with self and other have also been considered. This understanding of BDSM – as a process grasped by and expressed through the flesh – illustrates an emergent property of many elements in combination. This is a gestalt, formed through the experience of practices which are experienced as profound and powerful. The next chapter will push all these ideas further, in considering how BDSM play enables the exploration of physical and other limits, boundaries and edges.

10 – Exploring the Edge

The hard act... is that I learn to love the part of me that would make therapists visibly draw back in fear if I talked about it. I have had therapists react that way before. He doesn't ask that I try to change him – I am doomed to carry my Fenris nature to my grave... – but simply that I love that part of me with the same love I have for the rest of me... [That] means finding ways to feed him, finding people to feed him with, who desire what I desire, who can accept this with joy... It's hands-on, up close, teeth and snarling and bruises that don't show off well after the fact. It's my own fear of me being rejected because of that part of me, a searing vulnerability in the midst of power.

– (Kaldera, 2010 p.106)

"My weakness is precious. It is precious because it walks side by side with vulnerability; it is precious because it served as the baseline for my strength. It is counter measure, and that by which strength may be measured... The desire to jump when you peer over the edge of a cliff or off the side of a bridge is human. We are curious creatures, and information about the point beyond death, beyond madness, is very scarce. No wonder we crave it. No wonder I push myself, again and again, to that edge, to that brink."

– (Williams, 2010 p.172)

Each of the preceding chapters has required a delineation of boundaries of one kind or another, in order to focus on a specific area in depth. The fuzzy and permeable nature of many such boundaries has also been observed. The concern of this chapter is not to mark out another area to consider what is inside it, but to consider more closely the role and nature of boundaries within BDSM play. In doing so, I will begin to lay the foundation

of conceptualising BDSM play as a process of ritualising that is, perhaps, the most significant contributor to gestalt kink.

Many subcultures constitute themselves in comparison to what they understand as the mainstream or the normal (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1990). This construction is similar to the way in which concepts of dirt arise from classifications of cleanliness (Douglas, 1966). The BDSM Scene self-defines like this, with players defining the Scene and its activities as that which is “not vanilla”. In this way, BDSM is positioned as a process of transgressing particular boundaries of behaviour. Within this large-scale transgression, play involves exploring more specific boundaries of various kinds, both establishing and rupturing them. The liminal spaces created by and for this process offer a dual dynamic, that not only reflects the culture in which the play occurs, but creates the possibility of alternatives (Buenting, 2003). In this potentiality is both power and risk. The experiences shared in the play-space, where “normal categorisations are abandoned,... there is willing suspension of disbelief, [and] the outcomes are uncertain” (Ezzy et al., 2009 p.398) undoubtedly contribute to the sense of the kink Scene as a community (Xygalatas et al., 2013).

The concept of liminality has come to be widely used within both religious and non-religious contexts (Thomassen, 2014). It is a useful descriptor for any in-between state, place or moment, in which apparent certainties are challenged and new possibilities for relationship with self, with other and with the world are created (Ezzy, 2011, Ezzy, 2014). Liminal spaces are thus both powerful and unsettling, but when actively engaged with they are disturbing “in a constructive way” (Ezzy, 2014 p.41). They enable the individual to immerse themselves in an embodied performance which allows for the development of “life-enhancing response” (Ezzy, 2011 p.245) to challenges of contemporary life. As it plays with boundaries and the emotions and risks associated with

transgressing boundaries, BDSM creates opportunity for such a process. Individual BDSM players understand and negotiate boundaries that must be held at a distance, boundaries that can be approached or even touched but which must not be stepped over, and boundaries that seem to exist outside the play-space but dissolve once within it. A scene involves a delicate dance among and perhaps along these edges, before returning safely with whatever experience has been created by the journey.

The experience created by playing with the lines that separate 'normal' from 'deviant', 'acceptable' from 'unacceptable', 'sane' from 'insane' are diverse and multiplex. They may enable self-knowledge and self-creation (Holmes et al., 2006, Lyng, 2012), moments of "experiential anarchy" (Holmes et al., 2006 p.331) and a chance to touch the "intoxicating tension *between* artistry and abandon" (Ferrell, 2005 p.78). They create potential for transformation (Bromley, 2007), transcendence, and a recognition that the desire for such boundary exploration links people together (Lyng, 2005).

Because it creates access to what would be inaccessible to most people (Newmahr, 2011b), BDSM play is an intimate situation in which there is always a crossing or touching of "boundaries of the self that one does not allow to be crossed mundanely" (Bauer, 2014 p.111). This intimacy of mutually constructed and navigated edges adds another element to the already powerful potential of play-space. During play there is always a risk that boundaries will be violated, and not only in ways that have been previously negotiated and agreed. In this space of performed vulnerability it is possible to achieve "an experience of access to one another that cannot occur outside these spaces of potential violation" (Newmahr, 2011b p.179). This creation of intimacy through immersion in potential violation is a strong thread within the gestalt of BDSM. The term intimacy is not commonly used within the Scene, but alternative terms such as connection, energy and intensity carry the same characterisation, because the narratives which use these terms are focussed on

new ways of knowing others. Such narratives contributed strongly to the discussions about meaning and value I had with my research participants.

Transgressions

There are things that are not people's edges... things that people can make a compromise about, and say 'look, I don't really enjoy this but I know that you do, and it certainly doesn't put me off and I like your excitement. So, I'll play along with that'. And then there's other things, activities that... you *have* to enjoy. You have to have a *jouissance* for it. You have to have a hunger for it. And if you don't and you can't find that anywhere inside you it's an obscenity to do it. And you shouldn't do it because you're not going to enjoy the transgression.

– Madeleine

Limit's to me are... important because they define who you are... But limits are not, have never been, set in stone. Absolutely not. If it's not a physical thing that is stopping you from exploring something – like you can't unkill someone or if you are genuinely allergic to peanuts... Taking those and putting them aside for a second I think that limits are the edges of your self-knowledge. You don't know yourself past your limits. And some people don't want to, which is absolutely their prerogative... But I look at a limit that I have, and I can... sort of see the shadow of the landscape behind it, but not quite. But I am curious.

– Griff

Limits, and the transgression of them, cannot be isolated from one another. Limits are determined by and through recognition of what would be beyond them, and this creates meaning for both the line and the crossing of it (Jenks, 2003). Limit is meaningful in its fragility, and transgression in its “imminent exhaustion”, while both are given power and energy by the “perpetual threat of constraint or destruction presented by the other” (Jenks, 2003 p.90). In the abstract, this complex, spiral relationship is amoral. But in practice, in the contemporary world, Jenks argues that transgression always relates “to the mad, bad and dangerous” (2003 p.92), as defined by the codes, binaries, laws and oppositions that punctuate everyday discourses. As a result, some transgressive acts are criminalised, and thus gain “a tangibility” (2003 p.175) and significance beyond the personal knowledge that a boundary is being transgressed. But transgression is not synonymous with criminality. In a hypermodern society, where individuality is highly prized, the deliberate transgression of norms – and Jenks is clear that it must be both deliberate and actively intended to be a transgression – could be said to be a “hyperbolic announcement of identity and difference in a society where identity and difference are paramount yet difficult to achieve” (2003 p.3). This is not intended to imply any inherent moral quality in such transgressions but to position them as potentially purposive.

Most people engaging in BDSM understand the practices in which they engage violate perceived social and cultural norms to various extents, and some undoubtedly enjoy the transgressive thrill of that. However, to reduce transgression to a concept concerned solely with the counter-reaction of hegemonic values is both restrictive of personal choice, and furthers the impression of absolute binaries separated by clear lines (Bauer, 2014). An ambivalent relationship towards transgression in this political sense is demonstrated in the ways people relate to labels such as ‘sadist’ and ‘masochist’. These terms are rooted in nineteenth century medical discourse on psychopathology (Thompson, 1991), and this still colours much academic discourse on sadomasochistic behaviours today

(Langdridge, 2006, Langdridge and Barker, 2007a, Moser, 1998, Moser and Kleinplatz, 2006, Weinberg, 2006, Weiss, 2011). Both also remain possible psychiatric diagnoses, according to the current iterations of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5, , 2013) and the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Disease (ICD-10:2016 Version). The ICD states that these “significant deviations” from the way in which the average person thinks, feels and perceives are not always associated with either distress or impaired social performance (1992). This is in contrast to the DSM diagnostic criteria, which were changed in the latest iteration to specify that the ‘paraphilia’ must cause distress, impairment of function, harm to self or risk of harm to others before a diagnosis can be made (Boskey, 2013). But this contradiction between two major sources suggests that the alteration is insufficient to destigmatise consensual BDSM practised for mutual pleasure. It is also true that the diagnostic criteria retain a certain ambiguity with regard to what constitutes harm or risk of harm, and this ambiguity is shared by legal references to BDSM (Khan, 2014). It is clearly perceived to be abnormal to deliberately seek pain or to enjoy giving it; if transgression were a political act of resistance then claiming those labels might be an expected choice. However, among my research participants, people were often reluctant to use terms which make negative connections with something they find positive and pleasurable.

The term sadism in particular is one which many people are either unwilling to claim or spend time qualifying it as it applies to themselves. Oliver described a gradual realisation of its applicability: “When I started this I played with a lot of people who were masochistic submissives. And so, I thought that I was getting my enjoyment from getting them into sub-space and hurting them in the way that they wanted to be hurt. And then I played with a girl who wasn't a masochist at all – she enjoyed being spanked but she got the pleasure from the submission part rather than the actual being hit. And I realised that actually the part I really enjoyed was hitting her in a way that really made her flinch”. This

was something he had to spend time thinking about before deciding it was acceptable. By contrast, for Rocks, part of the enjoyment of topping comes from the fact that “it's the dark side, it's the forbidden side”. Consensual play allows him to “unleash the beast and [then] you can put it back in the bottle again”. However, Rocks is clear that the enjoyment is not precisely in the infliction of pain but is found in “the reactions that come back” from the bottom. “There is enjoyment in the fact that here is somebody who has not merely given you explicit permission to hit them; they're getting off on it!... It's that slight twisting of everything... that I enjoy”.

This “dark” association, which Rocks finds so powerful, can also lead people to be less comfortable with the ‘sadist’ label; Barry regards sadism as being “a little bit more about inflicting something on the unwilling” although he recognises that he does have “sadistic tendencies”. He concludes that “it's a fairly fine dividing line” but feels there is definitely a distinction between “dangerous sadism and, if you like, consensual sadism”. As Barry's sub, poppy's view is that Barry is not a sadist, because “he's lovely”. She suggests that the term is problematic because “a [va]’nilla [would] say a sadistic person was somebody who purely wants to inflict pain. And that conjures up an image of somebody who doesn't care. So, a sadistic person will tear the head off a kitten, [but Barry] will give the kitten a saucer of milk”. She adds that a sadist is more likely to be abusive, while Barry is “a gentleman” who would protect someone in distress – “if you were in a club and you ran to Barry he would protect you, he would look after you. Whereas I think a sadist would say ‘either get on with it or let me help’ [pause] with a cane in his hand”.

Yet Barry does create pain for poppy, and she enjoys the pain. But she does not consider herself a masochist. She offers two reasons why this term doesn't work for her: firstly, because she doesn't only want pain: “I want the whole package, because I'm greedy”. Secondly because “I don't think I'm good enough to be a masochist, because I

can't take enough pain to be classed as masochistic". Both of these reasons express things many people feel. The "whole package" might describe BDSM activities that are not focussed on pain such as submission, or it might reference things like trust, pleasure and joy as important components of play. For Barry and poppy all of this is inherent in the D/s nature of their relationship. The idea of not being able to take 'enough' pain to fit the definition of masochism came up more than once: Kyndyl said "I think I am [a masochist], then I look around at some of my friends and go 'no I'm not!'" ; while Madeleine, who sees herself as both as sadist and a masochist, talked of watching Michael using vampire gloves on Molly and thinking "it's kind of hot. But oh man, she can, she can take pain in a way I can't!" For Bea there was a distinction between what she fantasised about enjoying, and what she was able to enjoy in reality – "In my head I really, really like that [pain-play] side of things. In reality it gets a bit ouchy. So, a bit less so!"

Reflection on labels and what it means to accept or reject them is not uncommon for kinky people. What is perhaps less common is the explicit declaration that "I enjoy being slightly outside the norm" (Rocks). Bauer observes a division in pro-BDSM discourse between attempts to position BDSM within "sexual citizenship" (2014 p.8) on the one hand and an express desire to construct a transgressive and oppositional identity around kink on the other. I would suggest that most my research participants occupy a kind of middle ground between wanting to be sufficiently "normal" to avoid medical diagnosis and/or criminal prosecution and wanting to be sufficiently different to demonstrate their commitment to individuality and personal autonomy. There are some individuals who see themselves as contributing towards a new society through their kink, as Stoney-face describes: "we are different. We get it. We don't belong in most normal societies. We are defining our culture and society until it's great". And others who are motivated by political ends such as Ian's desire to challenge the "enormous hypocrisy about sexuality" he sees manifest in contemporary culture. However, there are many others who want both to

explore beyond the taboos created by society and at the same time to belong somewhere, as Rita describes:

You have to try everything twice because the first time you might not have been in the right mood, or something might have gone wrong that weren't your fault... So, if you try the second time and it doesn't work again, well two strikes and you're out... [But] what if I skip by something and... fail to recognise it and then die and it could have been the best thing in the world? [pause] But I [also] really want to fit in, and I really want to be normal. I want to feel normal. I want to see myself as normal. I want to be outrageous in the normal way... I want people to point at me. I want to feel, I want to think normal... So, I can... outrage people... in [pause] what's the word? [pause] like chavs or people who [pause] *Jerry Springer* [pause] you know what I mean? which is normal... I can outrage them people and I can upset them with my abnormalities. However, I am normal because all the people that go to [the club] do things that I enjoy on a regular basis... So, there's enough people to make me feel normal within myself and as long as I feel normal and as long as I feel part of something I'm happy... I don't want to walk alone. But I don't want to follow the herd.

Bauer is clear that BDSM is deeply concerned with both “boundary projects” (2014 p.163) and social difference, and my own research supports this. But he also argues that it is important to distinguish transgressions that are focussed wholly on the generation of pleasures from those that might result in social transformation, rather than assuming that any and all BDSM is a political project simply because it is transgressive. This is a blurred distinction; a marginalised social position might well create opportunities for both subversive thought and boundary-breaking experiences, but it does not guarantee either.

Experience gained in play-spaces might be initially motivated by pleasure-seeking but result ultimately in political action or interrogation of social systems (Bauer, 2014, Kraemer, 2014). It is also not impossible that opportunities for personal reflection and transformation result ultimately in gradual social change, without any explicit intention for them to do so.

Limits

Limits are limits, right? But then you've got the... hard limits, and the soft limits and the stretchable ones. And pushing limits, people push limits, they don't know what the fuck they want, is what that is... Again it falls into that trust – that trust, and that energy cycle. He trusts me explicitly to not break any of his boundaries.

– Aey

[I like to find] that fine balance so that when they come out of it they're not sitting there going 'oh, you'll never touch me again! Don't you come near me!' They come out of it, and you can see them in essence feeling good about themselves – 'I've just done something that I didn't think I could do! I've felt that panic rise up but I controlled it and I went with it'.

– Damien

In negotiating to play with a new partner, limits need to be explicitly discussed. There are two broad categories which are important – ethical and personal (Bauer, 2014). Ethical limits are like general moral principles, and are widely agreed by most people to include a refusal to inflict or submit to permanent damage, to be involved in real-life non-consent situations or to interact with others who are unable to give consent. This can extend beyond interactions with other kinky people as Madeleine describes:

I was teaching, at university level, and part of my job was pastoral care... These young male students would come into my office and sit down and they'd fucked up marvellously on their academic record, and we'd talk about it and they'd ask the questions and if they started to cry it would turn me right on. And I could tell that I could push them to it. Remind them of their obligation to parents, I could... whatever. [pause] Whatever. And it was like 'holy fuck, I am! I am!' and I can do this. But you know, it wasn't until I actually internalised it, that I was getting pleasure out of it... that I realised that I have to acknowledge I'm a sadist because if I don't, that's more immoral. That's really, that's unethical. Because now I'm basically getting off on it and I'm not even admitting that I'm doing it. And I'm doing it to people who are not in the least bit the appropriate people to do this to. The situation is not appropriate, and it's non-consensual basically.

Personal limits are the things that an individual does not wish to do, or have done to them. Griff says that these limits are "not about how much you can take. It's when it stops being fun." Things which are not enjoyable (even in the ambivalent, complex ways that pain, shame and discomfort are enjoyed within kink settings) are therefore limits and play should not trespass upon them. However, limits are also fluid and changeable, so are often divided into 'hard' and 'soft'. A hard limit is generally understood as a non-negotiable, no-go area during play while a soft limit describes something that may not be immediately desirable but which can potentially be pushed over time as Javelin describes:

I knew a woman that was very afraid of electricity, and electrical play. And so I said, this was after we'd been playing for about four or five months on a fairly regular basis, I said 'I think it's time you started facing your fear of electricity. But we're not going to do it all in one jump, we're going to... build bridges to

that'. And so, the first time we played I just set the violet wand in front of her for the entire scene. Not plugged in, not switched on. Just where she could see it. And we did our normal play. The next time I turned it on so it's humming in front of her, and so slowly I started reconditioning her to the whole idea of electrical play. And then, when we finally did play with it, I said 'let me do your hand first' and so I did her hand on a very low power setting and she goes 'wow that's not so bad', and I said 'okay let me do your body'. And I started doing all her erogenous zones, I'd already mapped them out and she was going 'oh this is nice'. And then I lifted up her head and I gave her clit a good old jolt and she goes 'oh I like this'. And so, through the process she was not only able to face her fear, but discover something new about herself.... And it can be so empowering when you can do that.

Through such deliberate exploration of limits, BDSM is able to create the same kind of experiences of constructive discomfort that Ezzy observes in rituals which "make space and time for transformations of soul" (Ezzy, 2014 p.16). Through these embodied performances people can directly address matters of deep concern or perceived threat, and the opportunity to reflect on those matters, as they pertain to themselves, is opened up. Ritual, for Ezzy, deploys both cognitive and cultural framings and BDSM does the same thing for the same purpose. This is not a wholly conscious or articulated process; limits and the processes of their exploration are at least as much somatic and emotional as they are cognitive. For limit-pushing play, as with Ezzy's discomfiting rituals, "people do it because it feels right" (2014, p.5), and the enriching nature of the experience is primarily somatic and emotional – the sense of kink as gestalt arising from the experience of play.

Edges

Edge-play I consider like... art. Art is successful if it elicits an emotional response... To me, edge-play is a specifically edge-play scene if it elicits an uneasy feeling from someone, anyone. If it made somebody uncomfortable you have succeeded... The people going into edge-play know that it's weird. They know that it's at the edge of an accepted spectrum.

– Stoney-face

I think everybody has an edge, no matter where it is. Some people, they'll do straps or whatever, but they won't do canes... and to them that's too severe. Everybody has their limit to where they want to go, but I haven't quite found mine yet... I mean I see things that look really severe to me... People do blood, play with blood. That's a bit... not my thing. That would be quite edgy for me, but it's not for other people. They're like 'yay, let's draw pictures!'

– cate

Lyng's concept of edgework concerned with people drawn to situations of voluntary risk where there is either no clear reward at all, or where the experience itself is classed by the individual as of higher value than any manifest results. People engaging in such risk-taking are exploring 'the edge' – a boundary, such as those "between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness... sanity and insanity" or "order and disorder, form and formlessness" (Lyng, 1990 pp.855,858). Edgework activities push as close to the edge as is possible without tipping over by consciously pushing both personal and/or technological limits.

Within BDSM the edge is a term that is used to carry the same sense of exploring boundaries, so it is likely that the concept has some relevance for academic considerations

of BDSM. In the context of play, edges and limits are perceived as somewhat different, although potentially over-lapping concepts. Limits, in the personal sense, overlaps with personal edges to describe play that directly confronts a personal boundary or fear. Being on the edge is the point at which the boundary is reached, so that in this form “edge-play means pushing someone almost to their limits and then stopping before you go too far” (Kaz). There is a general sense that an edge is more acute than a limit, and carries some kind of existential risk, although not necessarily a physical one (Newmahr, 2011a). The other use for edge-play is as a descriptor for play that is “at the edge of what's kind of acceptable, or safe” (Ivy). A general list of activities usually seen as ‘extreme’, and so within this category of edge-play, would include breath-play, fire- or needle-play, hook pulls and suspensions, cutting and branding and electro-play.

Some edge-play is of both kinds and, for some, edge-play in the second sense carries much less anxiety or perceived risk than play with their personal limits. Newmahr (2011b) describes spanking as being a challenging and ‘edgy’ activity for her personally, but recognised that most practitioners would not consider it edge-play, and some would not regard it as BDSM at all (Plante, 2006). However, Newmahr was willing to engage in breath-play, which many regard as intrinsically edgy because of the inherent risks involved (Wiseman, 1996). Many people who do these ‘extreme’ activities do not experience them as edgy in themselves, although they may have done so in the past. Stoney-face regards a recognition of extremity as the core of edge-play, saying “if it makes somebody look twice, if somebody becomes uncomfortable, I would consider that edgy play... You can still have edge-play with no witnesses because you know certain things are just going to do that. They would make people uncomfortable”. He regards hook suspension as something which is intrinsically edgy in this way because “not everybody can handle the sight of somebody hanging up by their skin”.

Activities commonly regarded as edge-play entail physical risk, but with some the risk is probably substantially less than it is perceived to be. Similarly, 'mainstream' BDSM carries physical risks which often go unspoken. From a physiological perspective, a sterile surgical needle pushed through the surface of the skin carries very little risk, since it penetrates the skin cleanly, seals the opening with itself for as long as it is left in place, and is unlikely to cause bleeding. Wrongly placed needles can damage nerves but, contrasted with a misplaced cane stroke, the risk seems minor: a cane is fast moving, hard to control, and has the potential to split the skin wide open, with the concomitant risks of bleeding, infection and scarring. Yet caning is rarely described as edgy (although many people consider it to be at the more extreme end of sadomasochistic behaviour) whereas needles commonly are, suggesting that in BDSM conceptions of the edge as the emotional or felt edge of risk is at least as significant as the physical.

Some physical kinds of edge-play do carry greater and harder-to-minimise levels of risk. Breath-play is an example of activity that can impact on and be affected by underlying medical conditions of which the players may be unaware. It is therefore widely considered impossible to do safely. Colin equated edge-play with the physical edge between life and death, and avoids play he considers edgy, because as a medical doctor he has "confirmed too many dead bodies... I've probably confirmed three or four bodies over the years of people in BDSM type things that have gone wrong... and I am sure there are any number of very close calls". Aey is in agreement with this conceptualisation of the edge, saying edge-play is "where you can kill them by accident if you're not careful", and Mistress Marina also feels that "edge-play is how far I can push things, before I have to stop. That's always been my definition. [We are literally talking about] the edge of life and death".

But other forms of edge-play carry different kinds of risk, which may be combined with physical risk or may exist wholly in other realms. Role-plays which recreate scenes of

abuse, consensual non-consent, age- or incest-play all explore social taboos and carry a risk to emotional well-being. This can be understood as a psychological edge, which requires a particular skill-set to traverse and return safely; cate recognises this when she describes the edge, saying “I suppose it's the edge of sanity to be perfectly honest. Do you know what I mean? When you get to the point where you think ‘are you really going to...?’” For her, this psychological edge is an opportunity to demonstrate and build on her submission and trust in her Master. She feels edges are personally constituted so that, while needles would once have felt edgy to her, she wouldn't now categorise them as edge-play. This understanding of edges is important in the dynamic of her M/s relationship; she is determined that “if it was his fetish then it wouldn't be my limit”. By way of example she told me how she and her Master have worked together to overcome a personal edge so that she can now “take, and accept and enjoy every one” of her Master's selection of canes.

Importantly this approaching and deconstructing edges with her Master is not about the thrill of risk-taking but “the trust. It's not a thrill that I might not have the use of my arm by the end of the day, you know. It's not that kind of a thing... Yes, I know what we do is risky. Yes, hanging me from the ceiling is risky. Yes, tying my hands behind my back, sticking a gag in my mouth and blindfold on is fairly risky at that point. But then... it's a calculated risk. If he's doing that then he's constantly touching my hands, he's touching my face, he's touching my feet... He's feeling for making sure my circulation is fine. Checking my lips, am I going blue? Are my fingers going blue?” The responsibility for managing that risk is shared, “if we've been doing something and I've felt the rope here and it's pressing on a nerve, then I need to tell him. I have to be responsible, because he can't see the nerve being pushed”. The risk and the negotiation of limit contributes to the creation of intimacy, a quality that “is not only an outcome of collaborating the edge, but *central to its appeal*” (Newmahr, 2011b p.186).

Barry also understands the edge as being present less in specific forms of play, and more in qualities of experience. The edge is the point at which “it is acceptable on this side of what you're doing and unacceptable on the other, whether it's psychological or physical” and to play on that edge is to ask yourself “can you balance on that razor-edge?” Cee experiences the edge in similar terms, saying “what you have to remember with edge-play is knowing there's an edge, and you don't quite go over. You've just got your toes tipping over the edge of it”. Unusually among my research participants, perhaps because of her professional involvement in play, she understood personal limits to be on the other side of the edge, “as being as a stone wall that you can't actually penetrate. You absolutely don't touch”.

Edge-play is clearly understood in different ways, and the relationship between edges and limits is both confused and highly personal. Nevertheless, experiences of the edge as described by Lyng (2005) – including altered perceptions of self, situation, space and time, dissolution of the self-object boundary and/or a sense of hyper-reality – can result from most forms of BDSM (Easton and Hardy, 2004). This means that a BDSM activity could be considered edgework from an outside perspective even if those involved would not call it edge-play. Care must therefore be taken not to treat edge-play and edgework as interchangeable terms. Newmahr, aware of this distinction, describes all BDSM as edgework. She argues that when placed against its broader social context BDSM clearly pushes normative, social, emotional and psychological boundaries, as it explores “the edges of morality... the liminal spaces between liberty and constraint, kindness and cruelty, and goodness and badness” (2011a p.698). In these spaces, as viewed from the outside, players engage in a risk-trust cycle that appears to delight in taking risks, including: incompetence, betrayed trust, and physical or emotional harm. They also, assuming the play has been successful, emerge from it without these things having occurred. This cycle creates a sense of understanding and connection “that cannot be created elsewhere. [It]...

exists in this space – it is the feeling of riding on the suspension, the thrill of the unknown and the risk of the violation”(Newmahr, 2011b p.179). It is this space of potential violation that allows for the intimacy which arises from a sense that boundaries are being crossed together.

Together on the Edge

I think things become edge-play for me when I'm getting to the point where I can't see the way back to the world any more. When I'm so close to losing my grip on, well, on here. So, close that I can only cling to my Master and he is my only anchor. The only solid thing.

– pussikin

I am always the one in control of it, so he is very submissive to me and he has given over all his control. And the thing is that he obviously trusts me... But there's also... almost like a fear of me. Because he knows how quickly I can switch from one thing to another, he also knows that I've got, to some people, very dangerous limits. So, when he gives himself over to me and allows me to make him powerless he's also got that little bit of fear about what actually I am going to do.

– Mistress Marina

Lyng (1990) originally defined the edge as a boundary-line lying between such apparent absolutes as life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness. Although he recognised that edges may come into being in relation to more problematic categories, like sanity and insanity, the edgeworkers he described were exploring edges that were fixed, corporeal and immutable. This emphasis “ignores, marginalises or devalues phenomenological emotional experience” (Newmahr, 2011a p.690), but the concept of edgework need not do

so. It is flexible enough to accommodate other kinds of risk. Boundaries between order/chaos, safety/danger, sanity/insanity or control/abandon create emotional or psychological edges that require as much skill to navigate and return safely as do physical edges. This broader skill-set includes “social-psychological and inter-personal [skills]... such as trust, expressiveness, emotional management, perceptiveness, self-awareness, introspection and self-restraint” (Newmahr, 2011a p.691).

These are not simply emotional aspects of physical edgework activities, but edges in their own right. The deliberate creation of situations in which emotions are of an intensity that most people would regard as overwhelming and/or uncontrollable constitutes “edgework that negotiates emotional edges” (Newmahr, 2011b p.700). Madeleine describes negotiating this kind of edge in relation to risky forms of play, citing the need for both self-awareness and control as a source of the pleasure to be found in such play: “I think needle-play and cutting and things like branding and you know anything like that, where the person who is the top has to be able to really push down passion. They can be feeling it internally, but they can't let themselves go. It's just too fucking dangerous to do that... And there's a kind of, there's a really [pause] it's like the emotional and [pause] erotic version of corsetry. You know... you're enjoying it because it's held in!”

Bauer critiques the original edgework concept from a different perspective, describing Lyng's edgeworkers as appearing to “operate in a social and ethical vacuum”, which represents them as unaware of any non-physical ramifications of their risk-taking and reduces their edgework to a process of “creating a spectacle demonstrating survival skills in a competitive context” (2014 p.148). The edgework concept is thus rooted in “a masculinist ideology” (Newmahr, 2011a p.689) which emphasises the individual and their independent negotiation of boundaries. By contrast both Bauer and Newmahr consider BDSM edgework as either “interdependent, in which edgeworkers need one another in

order to navigate the edge, or collaborative – that is, in which edgeworkers construct and constitute the boundaries for one another” (Newmahr, 2011a p.692). Ben describes such co-construction and exploration when he observes that BDSM is “all about going into the areas that people will not go into in vanilla life”. This must entail exploring limits – “A careful, no, a *responsible* Dom, and a good Dom, will push his or her subs limits. Not only for his or her own kicks or satisfaction but for [the sub's] as well. So, if there is activity that I would like that is not in a hard limit and she is not sure, or doesn't want to, but it's not a hard limit I would push. And I would push two or three times. At the third or the fourth time, if I feel that ... there isn't a joy for both of us, then that's out of the menu.” This process of exploration is at the heart of Ben's understanding of what BDSM is – “an exploratory journey to joy”.

To play like this requires something more than a calculation of the odds in relation to physical risk. Players take a “leap-of-faith... akin to trust” (Bauer, 2014 p.147), which allows their edgework to become a practice of taking care, of themselves, of others and of their relationships to others. Michael says “oftentimes the edge that I have is the measure of my trust, and how much she trusts me. So oftentimes the edge that I tend to play with is [pause] can I convince her to trust me to do this thing? [pause] It's how can I push this boundary? Can I push this edge? Can I push this envelope in a way that, at the end of the time, she will find acceptable?” The more established trust between play partners becomes, the harder it may be to play with these kinds of edge. For Griff, “the best moments in a scene, any scene I've ever done that I thought afterwards ‘whoa, that is one for the books’, it has always been the moment where I saw the other party having to... forcefully reassess the situation. Having to go ‘ooooookay’. Like a mental double-take. It's the moment [pause] the moment where they go ‘oh, hang on, he isn't playing’”. In other words, the moment when there is a genuine realisation that the trust can be broken, that such a violation is actually possible, is also the moment which creates the most intense

pleasure for him. It is in these moments that he really experiences himself as in control, “because up until that point they were allowing me to do things to them... Before, I am in control of the *situation*. I can make sure that this hits you, and that pinches you, and this happens there. But the moment you start thinking ‘oh hang on, he's not kidding’, that's the moment where I can do things to your brain”. This means that “there are certain things that I really like doing that I cannot do with people I know too well”. A balance must be struck between there being enough trust to play together but not so much that as to prevent those intense and real emotions. For Griff, “one of the things I like playing with is fear... but I'm not a dangerous person, which if you know me for more than say six months you do know. And the more in depth, the more I do know you the more difficult it is for me to actually convince you. It's not about fake fear, I don't want [pause] I don't get off on fake fear. It's the real fear and if you know me well it's more difficult for me to convince... of the situation, to convince you that what I'm doing is genuine.”

This is playing with a number of edges for both players, not simply the edges of fear but also a confrontation with the “beast in the bottle” described by Rocks. This self-recognition may be particularly acute in the type of play Griff describes. However, elements of occur across the broader spectrum of BDSM play, because of the dominant socio-cultural attitudes to pain and distress and the negative associations with finding enjoyment within those. Awareness of this is evident when Griff describes one of his favourite forms of fear-play: he calls it “serial-killer play – even though that is not a thing and it shouldn't be a thing even though it's really hot, but never mind”. As soon as it is named it becomes necessary to explicitly distance the idea from the reality of psychopathic murder.

Griff described one scene of this kind to me at some length (see page 111), emphasising how real the experience became for his partner – “he was convinced I was

going to cut her up. She wouldn't safe-word, because she thought 'if I'm going to safe-word he's going to kill me'. She also didn't get up and run out of the front door". Griff describes impact of this scene as being rooted in his successful creation of fear:

"I had absolutely convinced her that there was no way out. That she wasn't going to get up. That she wasn't going to grab things. Because it just doesn't happen. And you know I just slowly took away all the options, leaving her with the only logical conclusion which is 'I'm going to die'. There is no way to [pause] describe that. And not in a good way, not only in a good way. Because that was the most intense scene I've ever done. Since and before. You know how some people say 'I don't think I could ever kill anyone', or 'I think I could'. Right, you don't actually know until you're in the situation. And because I played it well I was in that situation. She was on the floor with various cuts of meat written out on her in marker, with a saw and a chisel and a knife. All there – the bathtub was lined with plastic – it was all there. I could have done it.

Griff's account reveals how edges are mutually constructed through the process of play; if the bottom he was playing with had not responded in the right way, Griff could not have taken either of them as close to the edge as he did, neither could he reach or confront that edge alone. Both parties were necessary to make the edge, and then to walk it. This kind of play, where one player is led to feel the risk as real while the other knows it is not, is commonly called 'mind-fucking'. Bauer describes such play as having the potential to raise emotions that are disquieting, but which are accepted because of the intensity of experience created at the same time. He considers such an experience as necessarily intimate, describing it as an "exuberant intimacy" which rejects "reason, moderation, mediocrity, harmony and equality as well as reproduction and usefulness" in order to

celebrate and engage with “difference, tension, intensity, risk, excess, ecstasy, wastefulness, perversity, campy extravagance, fluidity and insanity, as well as becoming something beyond the human”(2014 p.4).

Both Newmahr and Bauer agree that BDSM offers an opportunity to challenge conventional understandings of intimacy as inherently romantic, healthy and positive. Instead, they recognise that intimacy is inextricably entangled with ideas about boundaries, and that it can be experienced negatively – it may well be the reality of its forced intimacy that makes an experience like rape so horrific. Understanding intimacy as “the revelation of that which is innermost to another actor” (Newmahr, 2011b p.168) allows for the recognition that intimacy is ambivalent. BDSM enables intimate encounter by creating experiences that access what would usually be inaccessible. Within those spaces people are deeply connected – as Cee observes “at that moment in time with edge-play, I am theirs and they are mine” – but these are spaces where emotions are intense and contradictory feelings might be experienced simultaneously, a space where “he doesn't ever want to hurt me, but he does want to hurt me” (Rita).

Spiritual Edgework

I think that BDSM and spirituality, even if you think they are separate paths, everyday you're going to learn something new and grow and change.

– Kyndyl

In conceiving edgework as negotiating emotional or physical edges the space for understanding BDSM in relation to spiritual edgework is perhaps opened more widely. Lyng recognised the potential of edgework experiences to call the nature of reality into question and to enable individuals to transcend “the givenness” (2012 p.411) of the prevailing cultural constructions surrounding that concept. The “potential for human

actualisation" (Ferrell, 2005 p.78) exists within these moments on the edge, where it is possible to discover and rediscover new ways of being, knowing and relating. However "spiritual edgework" is a more explicit demonstration of the connection between practitioners and "a source of transcendent power" (Bromley, 2007 p.289). Bromley does not equate this transcendent power with any explicitly religious concept such as God, but it nonetheless remains a term most of my research participants did not use. They spoke of their intense play as being more concerned with enabling self-exploration, and connecting them to their partners, than with contacting something external. However, when the terms in which people conceived of spirituality are considered alongside the nature and purpose Bromley ascribes to the activities of his spiritual edgeworkers, the absence of a framework of belief in a transcendent power is not an impediment to framing BDSM as spiritual edgework.

Bromley argues that religion is a social form which is used by human beings to create a sense of empowerment via the construction of a "mythically relevant edge" (2007 p.287) which offers both certainty and contingency. People construct their own understanding of the transcendent, and he is interested in it as "an autonomous source of power" (2007 p.287), connections to which are formed via ritualised edgework to create and/or enhance the edgeworkers sense of control and empowerment. Religion is complex because "it is through creating a sense of power that the faithful transcend the power available to them in the everyday world... humans gain control by ceding control" (2007 p.300). This paradox was well understood by Stoney-face who says was he was "not fully realised as shaman in my own skull until I just said [to the Great Spirit] 'yeah okay I get it. I get it. I give up, you win. I'm yours. Use me as you see fit' ... It was an acceptance that I had to give in, I was not going to be the greatest evolution of myself without giving in. And once I submitted all of a sudden I had that confidence that 'yes, this is me'. So, I had to submit to fully realise the truly dominant aspect, because the dominant part is the

confidence that I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing". Stoney-face's participation in hook-suspension rituals clearly resonates with Bromley's understanding of spiritual edgework practices that create situations of danger and mythic weight, into which tension is built through ritual sequence. Ultimately, the participants in these rituals confront that danger directly, and the tension is resolved by their survival in "a transformational moment when a connection with transcendent power is experienced directly" (2007 p.294). If the transcendent is socially constructed this description need not necessarily relate to an other power beyond the edgeworkers themselves. If transcendence is understood in its broadest possible sense of going beyond or outside the everyday experience of physicality to create or encounter something new, then it becomes clear that BDSM can create it, and that experiences of BDSM can be characterised by profound and transformational connection with such a thing.

There are some clear similarities between Bromley's chosen exemplars of fire-walking and snake-handling and BDSM. None of these are practices which "'mainstream' comfortably" (2007 p.288), so all are commonly dismissed as anomalous and/or pathological. All three activities involve notions of personal power that are distinct from everyday roles and understandings, which have the potential to create intense experiences of connection and transformation. More specifically, they create events and/or sensations which may be perceived initially as being beyond limits, together with opportunity to transcend those limits. People who attempt the activity in ignorance of the necessary skills or preparations are regarded as foolish; in all three contexts the central scene is built up to and prepared for, participants actively choose to "step outside of safe space" (2007 p.296) and into a newly created liminal space. On a more conceptual level, fire and serpents are symbolically associated with life and death, creation and destruction; they also have the power to awaken primal fears. BDSM likewise uses symbolically weighty and fear-inducing tools – needles, knives, electricity – and plays with existential anxieties of engulfment,

petrification and implosion (Langdridge, 2005). The risks involved in all these activities are real. But, in common with other edgework activities, it is not as great a risk as the casual observer may imagine, owing to the range of skills developed and deployed by the participants.

Going beyond these overt similarities it is possible to see how BDSM can push edgeworkers to “envision their own potential to break through what they have come to regard as unalterable human limits” (Bromley, 2007 p.290), in the way Bromley describes firewalkers doing. The stepping outside of safe space (as he describes it) is an expression of trust in a transcendent Other, while for BDSM players that faith is invested in one another. But the results can be similar moments of empowerment, connection and realisation. Griff describes a profound moment of self-discovery resulting from the powerful scene described above: “Here's the thing, here's the thing. At that [pause] because I've never been in that frame of mind before [pause]... you have to be convincing, you have to be convincing. And I could have done it, as in physically. I mean everything was there. But I couldn't. I discovered that there is [pause] an absolutely huge brick wall at that point in my brain that stops me from taking that further. There is absolutely no way I would ever kill anyone... but you know what, I realised that I didn't know that wall was there before. Now I do.”

In a similar vein, Mistress Marina describes edge-play scenes in terms of realisation and control. Edge-play “highlights everything. Everything is on edge – your nerves are on edge, your eyes are focussed, your hearing. You're concentrating totally because that's how close you are to that limit... For me it's almost like thinking... ‘you can do this if you want, you can do this if you want’... it's almost like taking control of myself. Because it is in my control what I do. I could do something really damaging that could then wreck

everybody's lives or I could, just one second before it becomes that, say 'OK you can breathe now'".

This kind of exploration is not the sole prerogative of tops; Molly also defines edges in this way, seeing them as distinct from "things where I just go 'no, they're not my things'", even though some of the things she rejects might be considered edge-play in the wider kink community. Instead, edge-play for Molly is constituted by "those fuzzy boundaries that actually I want him to explore, that I get off on exploring". This is because those are the places "where I discover things about myself that I didn't know, where I had an inkling – I guess that's the kind of rape play, consensual non-consent... knife play, cutting, blood play and branding."

This process is not the exploration of an isolated self, but what Cee describes as "the interaction of two like-minded souls... wanting to experience something on mutual ground". She says it is "not just spiritual" but all encompassing, because "it's all the different layers. You're targeting lots and lots different places – it's physical, it's emotional. Lots of different areas". Neither is it a pure acquisition of abstract knowledge as it has the potential to change feelings and attitudes associated with that knowledge, as Penny says, "I think now I've always realised that I was submissive but before it was always... a very, very negative thing... And now I've realised that is a good [pause] it's something that I allow to happen, it's not something that someone else takes from me."

These new perspectives and understandings of self, relationship and reality are not grounded wholly in achievement, in learning that you can 'take it' or in triumphing over adversity. This might be expected in the contemporary world, and is implied by discourse exploring BDSM as healing (Barker et al., 2013). BDSM can offer those things, but it also requires the experience of things as they are. BDSM enables the exploration of weakness, of role reversal, of pain and humiliation or degradation as experiences in themselves rather

than things to be overcome. These are areas of deep concern, and engaging with them helps individuals to make sense of their worlds. More than this, by seeking to experience these things as they are practitioners can begin to move past some of the unhelpful binaries and absolutes which categorise much modern thinking about these areas.

Some of my participants spoke about the ability of BDSM to embrace contradiction, ambiguity and paradox – to be, as Ivy put it, “simultaneously meaningful and completely ridiculous!”, as well as challenging concepts of pain, power and other such apparent absolutes that are not really absolute at all. For Kraemer these “ecstatic, boundary-blurring experiences raise one's tolerance for the ungraspable and uncategorisable and so potentially permit us to re-examine our assumptions [about the world]” (2014 p.98). In this way, BDSM makes an abstract knowledge of the complexity of things, and the inadequacy of the labels we choose to describe them, into a lived reality. This kind of boundary blurring is made possible by the entrance into another world that is enabled through the process of play. Play offers a means of marking out time and place in a way which creates a “special kind of expectancy” (Douglas, 1966 p.78) about the experiences within this new place. Play offers a frame within which attention can be focussed to “shut in desired themes or shut out intruding ones” (1966 p.78), and without this framing the intense and contradictory experiences would not be possible.

Spiritual Kink

It's definitely part of things [like spirituality]. It definitely helped me push past that next, impossibly, inflexible barrier, that part of me... that part of you that thinks 'I'll never do that, I can't...' If you're not growing you're dying. So you're always looking for that next thing that will help ... And so suddenly the world is so much brighter. It's an exciting place.

Given the ways in which spirituality was understood by my research participants, it would be hard to reject a spiritual component to experiences which manifest in the ways discussed here. Bea defined spirituality as being “the religious experience without having that overall God-like figure”, reflecting the main distinction people drew between the concepts of religion and spirituality – the existence of an external authority. Fleshing out this distinction reveals a range of factors that contribute to a sense of the spiritual. There was an idea of what Cee terms “this other level that I don't quite know what it is but there is another dimension, that I sometimes feel like I'm getting to”. Damien connected this other level with a “desire to have something beyond the physical – beyond what [people] can experience, touch and taste – to be out there and give their life meaning in some way”. For most people this finding of meaning was linked both with connection to others, and to self- knowledge, as Twisted explains: “Spirituality is connectedness with yourself and other people around you, possibly even connected with the planet. Because I think there are things going on around us that we don't understand, although I'm not religious I do think there are things that we don't understand. And there are powers that we don't understand. So that's spirituality for me... It's connectedness. It doesn't have to be physical, it can be, but it doesn't have to be. For me it's having an openness or to be aware of other people and your environment and what's going on around you”. This understanding of kink as having spiritual elements is widely acknowledged within the Scene, and the experiences which give rise to the qualities associated with spirituality revolve around explorations of limit in relation to experiences of imbalanced, interpersonal power.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered the construction and exploration of boundaries in BDSM play. The repeated immersion in trust-risk cycles perhaps constitutes “the ultimate boundary” (Newmahr, 2011b p.186) of BDSM, as spaces of potential violation of trust are created and recreated. Walking the edge “between being violated and not being violated” (2011b p.186) forges intimate connection, and enables transformative experience which contribute to ongoing processes of religioning and feed the sense of BDSM as gestalt. A consideration of edges, in the sense proposed by Bromley's concept of spiritual edgework, highlights the importance of the framing of the experience offered by play-spaces. It is this framing that allows for the intensity and authenticity of the experiences that result, since what happens within the play-space is not experienced as the role-play it may appear to be from the outside.

The following chapter explores this framing in more depth, considering it as a process of ritualising kink.

11 – Kink Ritualising

I didn't realise that the work I was doing was spiritual, that the tools I was using to open stardust were the same ones that people had used for thousands of years to induce transformative experiences. Rhythmic pain, trials of endurance, physical ordeals, confession, breath-work, energy work in the form of guided imagery – these were all things I did instinctively... without knowing what doors I was opening.

– (Krittika, 2011 p.182)

The words 'spiritual' and 'sacred' mean different things to each of us. Some of us put religious value and context to these words, but I do not. I look at these words as classifying the intent of our rituals to strengthen our relationships and our commitment to them. I believe that for most Masters and slaves, the relationship that they forge using ritual, mythology and metaphor are considered sacred to the parties in the relationship.

– (Master K Ron, 2011 p.66)

BDSM is process-oriented, challenging and subversive (Kraemer, 2014). Practicing it enables people to explore emotional and physical limits within settings which can heighten awareness of vulnerability or create a sense of great power, with the concomitant awareness that this is power wielded with consent, and the knowledge that one is both safe and greatly valued. We have already seen that the process of play which creates these experiences has many facets, and that these facets combine to enable the creation of an “‘as if’ or ‘could be’ universe” (Seligman et al., 2008 p.7) – an other-where, experienced as fully real and authentic, within which different potentialities can be shaped and explored. This “standing... consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life” (Huizinga, 1950 p.13) is a

feature of academic understandings of play. This aspect of play allows people to “play the game seriously, but [they] understand that [they] are playing” (Droogers, 2014 p.23); they know they are playing but they can react to things as-if they are so. This offers a basis for connecting the play and ritual, where ritual is understood as “the temporary emergence and playful enactment, in its own right, of a shadow reality” (Droogers, 2004 p.138).

Playfulness and seriousness are not intrinsically opposite; the process of ritualising involves experimentation with another reality, so ritual actors can be understood to be playing seriously with “variations, inversions, contradictions, double play, irony, incongruity, and counterrealities” (Droogers, 2004 p.139). Variations, contradictions and inversions are important elements in the construction of a scene; that BDSM play is serious is evident in the effort expended to acquire skills and knowledge, in the durable personal and/or social/psychological benefits that result from it, in its sub-cultural unity and the ethos of its community, and in the extent of personal identification with the practice (Newmahr, 2010b).

Ritual, too, is a dynamic process of activity and enactment (Grimes, 2002, Grimes, 2013, Houseman, 2008, Kapferer, 2005, Schechner, 1993, Seligman et al., 2008). It is through movement, and the responses of bodies to one another, that ritual actions combine to create new spaces (LaMothe, 2015). Whether these are described as “shared ‘as if’” subjunctive worlds (Seligman et al., 2008 p.8), virtualities of “self-contained imaginal space” (Kapferer, 2005 p.47) or “counterrealities” (Droogers, 2004 p.139) is less important than the experience of them as real other-where, in which particular qualities of experience can be found. In this aspect at least, ritual-space and play-space are hard to distinguish. I suggest that when the people in such a space begin to feel it, and/or the actions taking place within it, to be gestalt then a boundary has been passed. The crossing of this boundary allows the serious process of playing to be understood as a process of ritualising. Making this connection avoids presenting ritual as a simple acting-out of beliefs

or symbolic representation of worldview and instead sees it as fluid, dynamic and active processes of creative construction by agents for whom “the medium is very much the message” (Seligman et al., 2008 p.113). The impact of the experiences so created, and their perceived difference from the everyday, enables the conceptual framing of the process which produced it as a self-contained event, distinct from its surrounding milieu. The qualities and potentials of such a process are the same whether we name it playing or ritualising.

In previous chapters, I have shown how BDSM play creates an other-where in which self and body are experienced differently, and relationship is both communicated and enacted. Such other-where have experiential qualities that are hard to put into words, and elements contributing to the gestalt whole can be identified in the nature of the space itself, and the practice which creates and holds it for the people inside. Play-spaces are spaces of potentiality, where different possibilities can be brought into existence; such spaces are dangerous, because of the openness to chaos inherent in abandonment of norms (Douglas, 1966, Ezzy et al., 2009). Through a shared desire to explore such uncertainties, both personal connection and a broader sense of *communitas* can be forged (Lyng, 2005), as occurs in intensely emotional rituals (Whitehouse and Lanman, 2014). Edgework BDSM enables exploration of limits, and reflection on what lies beyond them, which contributes to people's discovery of ways to live and be in the world (Ezzy, 2014). I have separated these elements, but in the performance of kinks they combine and interact to create the strength and power of the play experience and, perhaps, enable the emergence of a sense of kink as gestalt.

Bringing all these elements together creates a strong impression of similarity between the practice of BDSM and religious ritual, but I wish to do more than argue that BDSM simply *looks* like ritual. Rather, I contend that gestalt play is a form of ritualising

because it contributes to the religioning processes of the individuals involved. The ritual process of the play allows the gestalt to be foregrounded, made tangible and so explored.

Given the nature of BDSM experience, and the fact that at least some elements of BDSM closely resemble ascetic practices, it may not be wholly surprising that the deliberate use of BDSM practices in named ritual contexts does occur within the Scene. But it is interesting to note that few, if any, of the people who do this confine their BDSM to contexts identified as ritual ones – kink ritualists are also kink players. This offers an unusual opportunity to explore the concept of ritual by looking at a collection of activities engaged in by the same people, using the same skills and knowledge but named differently on different occasions. It allows me to ask whether the naming creates a difference in the qualities and significances of the resulting experience and, if not, whether it is meaningful to separate the practice into fixed and discrete categories. This chapter will therefore consider kink practices named by the practitioners as ritual before using the perspective offered by an understanding of ritual to examine kinks not so-named.

Kink Named as Ritual

I look at being a Dom as a kind of shaman; I'm taking them on a journey inside their headspace... I think every Dom does, in a sense. Taking them on some type of journey, whether spiritual or not... It's still a journey.

– Javelin

I can't really separate who I am as a person and who I live with every day as a person from my kink identity... I can't be a separate kinky version of myself, and go home to be a shaman version of myself.

– Stoney-face

I just call it BDSM. Because it covers everything... lifestyle is probably the other short term I use because for me it is that. It is part of everything I do, mundane or otherwise.

– Kyndyl

Of the forty-four people with whom I conducted research interviews, three spoke of performing deliberately constructed ritual which used kink as an aspect of practicing their religious identity. In common with most of my research participants, the term 'religion' was not a positive one for these individuals, and all of them chose to describe themselves as spiritual rather than religious, even though all identified with named traditions.

Kyndyl describes themselves as a pagan and was, at the time we spoke, a practicing Reiki Master and "training to be Wiccan clergy".¹⁷ Kyndyl describes their path as "a mixture of Northern tradition, Buddhism and shamanism". For Kyndyl, religion describes "a doctrine based system for people to... basically find their way to deity", while spirituality is the term to describe people finding their own way to the divine. In the context of their kink identification, Kyndyl identifies primarily as sub, but said they have "tried it all", including lifestyle relationships from both the Dominant and submissive side. When discussing ritual Kyndyl spoke of incorporating kink into various rituals for "raising energy or getting rid of something or sacrifice" and also "honouring one of the deities I'm working with... specifically for the primary deities I work with, I would consider myself their property". However, this does not preclude Kyndyl taking the top role in a ritual context.

Stoney-face is a shaman within Sioux tradition. He is "readily accepted as a shaman by tribe members" and is "living it" although he is not yet "tribally affiliated officially because it's very murky with people like me who are not pure bloods". He described his

¹⁷ The use of 'they' and 'them' as personal pronouns was requested by Kyndyl

shamanic path as evolving, but at the time we spoke he was walking the Heyoka path of the “sacred clowns... the contrary ones... the weirdest of the weird”. The task of this path is to make “people look at themselves but in humorous ways... make fun and poke”. He described this path as “sacred but not stoic” because “if you're not laughing something is wrong”. Stoney-face prefers to describe himself as a “spiritual being” but feels that “religion doesn't necessarily have to be a negative”. What he dislikes about religious institutions is “when you're trying to say that it works for me so it should work for everyone else or else, that's when I have a problem”. He feels that contemporary humanity has “evolved to the place where we want much more self-journey, self-discovery, self-improvement. We want a personal relationship with our higher power”, and this is what characterises his own spiritual path. In the context of kink, Stoney-face described himself as a “collared Switch”, living in a lifestyle relationship with his Mistress but happy to play either role with other people. His shaman aspect is very dominant, but is also a “paradox of duality” because he is “submitting to the will of the Great Spirit”. This duality was evident in the form of ritual he spoke about in most depth – hook suspension. At the age of 11 he had a vision of “the traditional Lakota Sioux ritual called the Sundance... that is being hung up by hooks in your flesh”, and years later “I made it happen... I manifested my reality to be with the right people at the right time”. He says that ritual hook suspension is not a kinky experience per se, but “a transcendental spiritual experience that had elements of kinky knowledge and play”. These experiences shape his conception of spiritual kink as applied to himself: it is a process of “incorporating what I can use in ritual and spiritual realms as a shaman, and incorporate them into my kink play to make people's raw kink play a lot more fun and more connected”.

Javelin started playing as a sub but is “now a switch”. In both top and bottom roles, BDSM is an aspect of Javelin's “calling in life”, which is “being a sacred harlot, being a sacred prostitute priestess... [to help in] bringing about a more sex-positive culture”.

Javelin became aware of this calling at the age of 15, a time when “I felt so lost, I didn't feel like I had a purpose or anywhere I fit in. One of the things that the energies told me was that you will have a place but you have to be patient. And then they gave me a glimpse of it”. Following this calling takes various forms, including running workshops and organising both sex and kink related rituals, generally at pagan events. As well as facilitating ritual for others, Javelin has engaged in BDSM rituals for personal transformation, describing one “reclaiming ritual” in which “I had a reverse PA piercing, done very slowly... to reclaim my female side.¹⁸ I had a symbolic hole in my genitals to reclaim my femininity. And... they also used a sound [a medical probe] to fuck my dick, so that I could be the receiver”. This ritual helped Javelin to claim “my true gender, as being both [male and female]” and demonstrates how for Javelin BDSM is the means through which “I was able to pull at every aspect of my life and have it make sense as a whole”. Javelin is an “eclectic pagan” because “I take a little bit from the Taoists, a little bit [pause] well, a lot from the ancient sex temples, I take a little bit from Wicca, a little bit somewhere else. But I take what I want, that applies to me, and I don't want the whole toolbox, I just want this tool or that tool”. Javelin does not see paganism as a religion, because religion is “an institution” which “takes some kind of head and makes them the responsible person for your spiritual development”. By contrast “spiritual is when you are responsible for your own spiritual development”. BDSM is part of this process for Javelin because it offers “certain tools that I can open doors I couldn't open without them”.

None of the three said that all the ritual they participate in has kink elements, nor did they say that all their kink play has ritual elements. But each of them is “using kink knowledge in a ritual way” (Stoney-face) sometimes, in the context of their personal religious practice. In addition, although all of them mentioned the role of intention when

¹⁸ A reverse Prince Albert piercing enters through the urethra and exits through a hole pierced in the top of the glans.

deliberately performing ritual and creating a ritual-space, they also each spoke of the possibility of play-space becoming ritual-space at times when there had been no prior intention to create a ritual. For Kyndyl, this kind of “spontaneous” ritual had given them “some of the more intense and basically helpful rituals I've been in”. Stoney-face agreed that play-space and ritual-space are “neighbours of each other” but they are distinct in a way he described in terms of frequency: “They're sort of inside the same frequency envelope. If you think of them as either oscillating or frequencies of a similar amplitude... they're similar wave patterns of frequency”. This frequency shift exists largely because in ritual “you are much more aware that you are creating the reality that's happening”. However, he agreed that it is possible for a ritual-type connection to be created during non-ritual play when a “frequency adjustment” occurs. Sometimes this is a conscious decision made by the top during the play, and sometimes it is more spontaneous: “If we're both just super-connected that day... and then all of a sudden we just click... everything just sort of fits right, and it just explodes. So, it can happen, and I'm not opposed to it happening, it's not like I dial it down and say ‘No, you can't come out and play today’”. Javelin felt the main difference between play-space and ritual-space was that Javelin needs to “be conscious of what's happening... all around me” when running a group ritual, which means that “I can't go as deep into sub-space... [or] if I'm in Dom-space I can't ride as deeply as I would like with the submissive”. However, Javelin also felt “the spiritual side of things” was always potentially present, because a Dominant is “a kind of shaman”, taking the bottom on a personal journey within a space that is “a safe environment... Although we don't cast a circle, it's kind of implied that it is there”.

It is clear that the tools offered by BDSM and the spaces it creates can operate as ritual, or be used for ritual purposes, and that boundaries drawn between kink and play are permeable. Both ritual kink and play involve the creation of an other-where, both utilise the same skill set, tools and sensations and the enacting of relationship between parties.

Non-ritual kink can also create the transcendence of sub-space, or the flow and hyper-awareness of Dom-Space, which might be associated with concepts of spiritual experience. Using Javelin's experience, it is perhaps more likely to take this form than ritual kink, although Stoney-face developed his frequencies analogy to describe deliberate shamanic journeying as distinct from the more spontaneous experience of sub-space: "It's a different kind of frequency. A different kind of wave altogether. They're really close to each other, but they are different". Where play-space and ritual-space are experienced as different, the clearest area of difference is intention, so that where the intention to create a ritual exists there is a degree of experiential difference within the space. Stoney-face did not experience his first hook suspension as a kinky experience, although it drew on kink skills, but he did connect this difference to being in space named as ritual-space rather than as play-space. He said that he is "using an extreme edgy method to achieve a spiritual state of mind that I'm looking for", while other people undertake the same physical challenge "in a non-ritual mindset. The body-mod people, brilliant people like CoRE [Constructs of Ritual Evolution], who do hook suspensions that are artistic and beautiful and moving and entirely invigorating to see but they're not rituals, its more theatre. And there's people who go into it with the mindset of that, almost sideshow element of 'oh, my god, I'm hanging by my skin by hooks'. And there's those adrenaline junkies... who go into it just for the high, just to experience what it feels like". Interestingly, CoRE does connect its work with ritual, describing it as "blending the practice of performance art with extreme rituals both modern and ancient... [through having] suspended our own concept of physical limitation, pierced the heart of our fears, and transcended the boundaries of social convention".¹⁹ Other qualities of the ritual experience – including changes to bodily

¹⁹ <http://www.wearecore.com> – accessed 10-Mar-16

sensations, relationship with time, connection to others in the space and so on – closely parallel intense play experience.

I do not claim there is no difference between ritual and play, but the difference is not an absolute one and it is not tied to any single element present in one but not the other. Engagement in processes of play builds space through practice, as does a ritual process. The space in which play takes place does not become play-space until the loop of sensation, reaction and response is fully realised, while ritual-space can be named and identified before the play process begins. However, the creation of that space is still enacted and its establishment as an other-where is necessary for full immersion into the ritual. Similarly, the space does not snap out of existence in either setting once the action is over; those involved must return from where they have been. Play often takes place without a specific aim or end in mind but this does not place it beyond the realm of ritual, as “causal opacity” (Whitehouse and Lanman, 2014 p.675) is not uncommon in events understood by participants to be ritual. When a boundary from this world into another is crossed, that crossing is known (Seligman et al., 2008), and with both BDSM play and ritual that boundary and the space it encloses are consciously created.

What happens in play-space appears to be a process of ritualising, both in form and in effect, but it is not universally named as such. The kinds of process which occur in BDSM play are what Grimes describes as tacit ritualisation: an “activity that is not culturally defined as ritual but that someone could interpret as if it were” (2002 p.28). He contrasts this with fully formed “rites” which occur when “a group enhances or emphasises the qualities to the point at which a definitional threshold is crossed” (2002 p.28). BDSM can be understood in both ways: sometimes it is explicitly named and constructed as ritual; on other occasions, while the activity may not be so identified, the significance, intensity or transformative potential of the play remains evident.

The primary difference between a 'ritual' and a 'scene' for the person engaging in one or the other is thus one of naming. Naming may incorporate a prior intention, or it may be claimed afterwards. It may refer to a set of actions intended to achieve a particular end, such as the ritual reclaiming of Javelin's birth body, or the realisation of a vision like Stoney-face's hook suspension; there may be an intention to raise energy and direct it to a purpose, or it may simply be a performed expression of identity as a spiritual kinkster. But these same things can happen, and do happen, without such naming because in play any denotive meaning is subordinate to the performative nature of the act (Seligman et al., 2008). In both play and ritual this creates a sense of meaningfulness that is always, to some degree, self-referential and self-validating (Handelman, 2005, Houseman, 2008).

It is important to remember that not all play is the same. It will not always achieve the creation of an other-where, or create the kind of "distinctive evocative qualities... and... inherent conceptual uncertainty" (Houseman, 2008 p.420) that are so much part of ritual acts. But it can, and it might, even when not named as ritual. Most of my research participants sensed something more than simply enjoyment in their play, a feeling I identify as gestalt. I suggest that when people do feel this, and value their practice as an "end unto itself" (Newmahr, 2011b p.68), one way to understand what it is that they do is as a process of ritualising which contributes to their personal religioneing.

Why Un-named?

I do feel the energy that's around, I feel very much in that sort of vibe of what's happening... but then part of me says 'this is complete bullshit'.

– Nomad

I think 'play' for a lot of people is the comfortable word, especially for those who go 'ick, I'm not going to mix healing or spirituality or

anything else other than getting my dick hard, or myself wet'...

[Calling it play] lets them think they are keeping the boundaries.

Language is a lot, unfortunately, about people's comfort levels.

– Kyndyl

The term and concept of religion was rejected absolutely and sometimes aggressively by many of my research participants. Few, other than Kyndyl, Stoney-face and Javelin, named what they do as ritual. Given the close association between religion and ritual it seems worth briefly visiting why this term may not have occurred. A generally unfavourable view of religion has already been noted as held by the practitioners of named ritual kink. This same attitude, based largely on the same reasoning, prevailed among my research participants. It was more strongly negative among those who did not identify with any named tradition (regardless of whether they considered that tradition religion/religious), for example Cee said that the very word “just makes me feel sick”. If the idea of religion is felt so strongly to be negative, and experience of organised religion is either negative or absent, then it is unsurprising that terms with perceived connections to this undesirable concept are also understood in negative terms, if indeed they are considered at all once the over-arching concept has been rejected.

Contemporary cultural discourse commonly places science and religion in opposition, with the former on the side of reason and proof, and the latter being the domain of the unreasonable or the foolish. This perception may well underlie the fact that many of my research participants were keen to emphasise their scientific interest, the value they placed on evidence and, often, their rejection of deity. Although I did not ask specifically about these things, many people felt it important to tell me that they knew the sensations, and shifts in perception, experienced during play were caused by body chemicals like endorphins or adrenalin. This knowledge was usually presented immediately after descriptions incorporating intangible, immeasurable and otherwise hard to describe

elements of experiences; to me it felt like a recognition that such things as transcendence have associations with the domain of the foolish or unreasonable and a corresponding desire to distance the speaker from those labels. It is perhaps unconscious, but a concern that admitting to the “non-rational and vaguer aspects” (Blum, 2012 p.209) of an experience was somehow diminishing (unless ‘real’ knowledge was also demonstrated) seemed prevalent whenever conversation strayed into these areas. As well as explicit declarations of scientific knowledge, there were apologies for using terms like ‘energy’ to describe things which do not literally fit such a category. Some, like Nomad, explicitly distinguished types of understanding, saying “one part of me says ‘ooh that's some hippy shit, or some altered plane’. While the other part says ‘well it's just your brain doing what your brain does’”. But he also said that “actually I don't care what it is”, and this sense that the experience is worth having, regardless of causes it might be attributed to, was widely shared.

In the contemporary world, the biological, the economic, the functional explanation is often seen as the only reasonable or admissible way to understand things. Ritual may be seen as simply out-dated or, perhaps more judgementally, as a means through which people seek “psychological compensation” (McWhorter, 2004 p.72) for realities of life they find themselves unable to cope with. Neither interpretation seems likely to lend itself to people reclaiming the term ritual when they consider themselves to have rejected the orientation which gave rise to it. None of this would remove a need for ritual, but it does affect the places in which people are prepared to recognise it, and the activities to which we are prepared to apply the term. If we think of ourselves as modern, and of modernity as progress, then “because we think of ritual as primitive, irrational, or otherwise bad... we refuse to see it in our lives” (McWhorter, 2004 p.73).

The positioning of reason as an opposite to religion can be placed alongside the issue of belief, and specifically of belief in deity. Scholars may be challenging the idea of any absolute connection between religion and belief (Vásquez, 2011) but the association is firmly entrenched in concepts of religion prevalent outside the academy (Nongbri, 2013), as seen in the personal understandings of the term my research conversations uncovered. The assumption that religion and belief are synonymous often formed the basis for a rejection of the term religion in any way applying to themselves –the association was so strong that the initial response to my question “what does the term ‘religion’ mean to you?” took the form of “well, I’m an atheist”. The thinking which characterises the Modern person as “someone who believes that others believe” (Latour, 2010 p.2) in things which have no reality, while considering themselves by contrast to be endowed with critical reason that is based on solid facts, infuses how many people are prepared to see their own actions and speak of themselves. For such a Modern person, religion is rendered unreal or superstition, because they lack the belief that is perceived in others, and perhaps this contributes to the scarcity of the term ritual in contexts outside the traditional institutions of religion. It also implies that if religion is belief in deity, then religious practice, including ritual, is a (symbolic) expression of that belief, rendering the concept of ritual meaningless in the absence of firm belief in deity. BDSM could not then be understood as ritual unless it is being engaged in as an explicit practice within a named religion, and with the aim of (in some way) expressing the beliefs associated with that religion.

Religioning and Ritualising

I had a symbolic hole in my genitals to reclaim my femininity... It's highly symbolic, but it's a little more than just symbolic... It was a very powerful and bodily empowering ritual that really helped me... I can't think of the word, it's not so much 'accept' as kind of 'bring

all my nature back together'. As a whole... Rarely am I seen as my true gender, as being both. And it was a good way to express that.

– Javelin

It is my view that a focus on belief is too-limited a view of what religion is, therefore it also offers too-limited a perspective on ritual. Viewing ritual wholly as an external marker of internal processes is distorting of the reality that people can engage in ritual activity without being concerned with meaning or symbolism, just as religion can be found outside religious institutions. The manifestation of both concepts within real individual lives is better represented via a shift from noun to verb that signals them as process or practice rather than thing, and allows attention to focus on the ways practice and performance create religious identities, power relations and manifestations (Nye, 2000). Religion is not an object, existing independently and impacting on people, but activity performed by people within the “ever-evolving relational community” (Harvey, 2013 p.95). Such activity becomes ritualising, not because of anything inherent in the actions themselves, but because of the way the actions are framed (or named) and oriented. Actions which take place within ritual can always be performed in non-ritualised contexts (Seligman et al., 2008) because, among the other things it does, ritual continually renegotiates boundaries by building and rebuilding the everyday world as-if it were one of many possible worlds.

Such negotiations and constructions are one means by which people participate in the “ongoing experiment of reality” (Harvey, 2013 p.82). These experiments require fluidity and creativity in order to create an as-if world as a shared could-be; they require the capacity to empathise, so that experiences which would otherwise be an individual “is” can be shared “in the potential space of what could be” (Seligman et al., 2008 p.23). As this shared, as-if world is produced through ritual actions, those actions must fully engage the

lived reality of the people who participate. Only if they do so will ritualists be marked “in the heart, in the memory, in the mind, in texts, in photographs, in descriptions, in social values and in the marrow, the source of our lifeblood” as opposed to the “skin-deep” impression of rites which do not effectively perform such experimentation (Grimes, 2002 pp.7, 5). For the many people who dislike the concept of organised religion and reject any external authority figure able to pronounce on personal spiritual development, the rituals most likely to be effective in this way will be the un-named emergent experiences that occur outside the structures of traditional organised religion.

The ways in which my research participants did speak of the role and importance of their play indicates experiments inscribed deeply into the marrow of those engaging in them. If ritual is a means of “negotiating our very existence in the world” (Seligman et al., 2008 p.8), this can be seen in Damien's description of BDSM as “that sort of expanding people's horizons... sometimes people are miserable without necessarily knowing why, and people are restricted without necessarily knowing that they are. And that's making them more miserable than they would otherwise be. So that expanding their horizons thing, you could think of it as a service to humanity”. Alternatively if ritual is a means of finding actions that “are also bridges – reliable doings carrying people across dangerous waters” (Schechner, 1993 p.230) then Mistress Marina's experience of BDSM as something which enabled her to become comfortable with “the feeling of power, which I don't think for women especially we are comfortable with” constitutes such a bridge. Or if ritual offers a kind of “spice[ing] up daily existence with flavours so exquisite that we are unable to forget the banquet... revealing what is most deeply desirable, most cosmically orienting, and most fully human” (Grimes, 2002 p.346), BDSM fits here too, as Ben describes it: “a looking into... the deep down needs” which takes one on “an exploratory journey to joy”.

Ritual can be framed in a variety of ways, and BDSM play can be described in terms which fit at least some of those framings. But, as previously stated, I wish to do more than say that kink sometimes looks like ritual. Ritualising is a pervasive human activity (Grimes, 2003) and as such it contributes to personalised processes of religioning. The multivalence of the concept speaks to its utility in these processes. Serious play becomes ritualising when the latent potential of the activity to transform, to enlighten, to confront and to explore become fully realised in the liminal as-if world of the play-space. A person for whom kink is gestalt feels that these extraordinary, somatic and emotional experiences are enriching contributions to self- and world-making, even where this contribution is not and cannot be fully articulated.

Elements of kink ritualising are identified and discussed below as particular ritual operators specific conduits, organisers or foci which contribute to the dynamic entirety of the play, allowing it to be experienced as a flow in which “the play transforms them rather than they transforming the play” (Ezzy et al., 2009 p.399).

Preparation and Anticipation

Every single pre-ramp-up is different, because all my situations are different. Nothing is consistent, there is constant change... But I do have to mentally prepare myself and it will normally be the day before; so if there's props, clothes, whatever, I get that ready. And that... you're sort of programming your mind as to what's going on... And then just before, I have to just give myself five or ten minutes to tell myself what it is we're doing.

– Cee

If it's meant to be a ritual I'm going to do everything beforehand. Call borders, invite whatever deities I want and... most of my friends

are also actively part of my BDSM spirituality group, so we all know what the heck's going on!

– Kyndyl

Anticipation of a ritual has been identified as a contributing factor to the power of that ritual to create liminal space and so to the potential impact and transformative power of the ritual (Bromley, 2007, Ezzy, 2014). Liminality is characterised by alterity and the dissolution of normality; anticipation of this state contributes to the framing of the space within which it will be experienced and heightens awareness of what is to come. This awareness can be read in the significance given to intention as a means of identifying named ritual, but this same kind of anticipation contributes to the experience of play and the creating of the play-space.

The importance of negotiation and informed consent prior to engaging in play is one part of this anticipation. Before playing together, new partners discuss likes, dislikes, interest and limits with a (hopefully) full recognition of the complexities and ambiguities involved. The knowledge of one another gained here makes a vital contribution to the eventual creation of an effective play-space, although it is unlikely to be sufficient in and of itself to create intense and immersive play. The lifestyle couples among my participants had carried out such negotiations at a much earlier stage in their current relationship, but they remained aware of it. Molly and Michael spoke of maintaining a spreadsheet in which their likes, dislikes, hard and soft limits and varying levels of interest in specific activities were recorded. Cate had a written contract with her Master, setting out the parameters of their relationship, including her responsibility to always be open and honest with him. Similarly, poppy said she had an obligation to always tell the truth, which extends to a sharing of limits and concerns. For these couples, play might occur spontaneously, but it might also be signalled by a specific instruction from the top or by an intention to attend a

play-party – events which might also trigger anticipation in other players. Michael likes to play with anticipation itself, by delivering the anticipated in an unexpected way: Molly “will have mentioned something to me... and I really pay attention to that and... so it will crop up. So, she might say... ‘I'd like you to use the knife on me tonight, I'm in the mood for that’. So I'll think about it, and go ‘yeah OK’ and then what I'll do is I'll spank her with the knife”.

For people not in lifestyle relationships or with multiple play-partners, occasions of play are more likely to be planned in advance and so more specifically anticipated. Ian spoke of “a phase of preparation” which occurs before play; since he rarely plays at home this usually involves packing a bag: “I'm going to take some toys along or ropes or whatever and I'm going to pack those... and then there's always a journey”. Nomad likes to “work through some of my Kung Fu forms” before he engages in shibari. This is a process of “clearing my mind of sort of everything that's around, and so it is really like meditation”. He says that he wants to do a “sort of clearing out anything that may have happened, anybody else that may have interacted [with me] ... sort of... wiping the slate of anybody else I may have worked with so I'm completely focussed on what I'm doing now”.

For Ivy, anticipating a play-date is like “a slightly ramped up version of the preparation that I would do for any date”; Rosie agrees with this, because it is important to “make sure you shave and put nice underwear on!”. But this is not the entirety of anticipation – the knowledge that play will definitely occur is a factor (and different to the thought that it might) as are expressed limits or interests. Griff emphasises the role of expectation, noting that “really... what you're trying to do is, you're not negotiating what happens in the scene. What you're trying to do is get an idea of what the other person is like, likes, doesn't like”. For this reason, he doesn't ask people what they like, instead “I always open with ‘how do you want to feel? Do you want to feel scared, do you want to

feel safe, do you want to feel exposed, do you want to feel under pressure, do you want to feel useless, do you want to feel... adored?" Framing negotiations in this way contributes to the anticipation by leaving a greater degree of uncertainty about specifics; my response to this description during our conversation indicates as much – I said that, even in the abstract context of general conversation, that question "opened doors in my head that maybe wouldn't have opened if you'd said you ask 'what do you like in terms of sensation?'" .

Preparation might also take more concrete forms: Ivy says that she has "had situations where in the run up to a play-date that I've been given instructions or things that I'm supposed to do during the day". Unusually, Madeleine described some of her play, and in particular cutting, as being "very ritual", and when she spoke most about preparation and anticipation it was in relation to this form of play. She said "you do have to know what's going to happen because there's you know... structural... there's medical stuff to be taken care of. And you need sterilising equipment and you need gloves and you need alcohol and you need... butterfly band-aids... You know you're going to do it for a long time; you talk about it before you do it a long time before, and you're preparing for it a long time before and you do this thing like 'I'm not going to turn up. I'm not going to turn up'" . This level of anticipation makes submitting to being cut "surrender on a level like nothing else".

The quality of anticipation for tops is different in some ways, as they are the ones who will shape the play as it unfolds. Mistress Marina describes her process of getting ready to play as "getting my Domme-head on". Although she is clear that she is always a Domme, she explained that this aspect needs to be more fully realised and explicit if she is going to play. An element of planning is part of the anticipation for some tops. For Barry this is minimal, as poppy's reactions and responses are crucial to the unfolding of a scene;

he finds that “after the first two minutes any plans I've had are gone”. Similarly, Damien says that he will just “close my eyes for a couple of seconds, let my imagination run rampant and then, move on from there”. By contrast, for Griff, the level of planning and preparation required depends on how he is intending to play: “if I'm playing with fear, or playing with someone's mind, someone's head, that takes a lot of thinking and planning in my head. Because that's something I really don't want to fuck up”. It should be emphasised that this kind of planning is not about scripting everything that will happen, but rather about determining the overall flavour or tone. His description of the process is worth quoting at length:

I never plan with including [specific] things. What I would plan with is how would I get someone to be... say we're going for scared. How do I get someone to be really scared that I have done something to their body that they didn't want, without actually doing it? Because that's the difference between playing and not playing right?... So, this person, what do I know about this person? Alright, she works in healthcare so I can't really scare her with medical things, OK. She is quite vain, she likes the way she looks, as I can see by the number of selfies she takes [pause] so alright. Apparently she appreciates the way she looks, so I'm going to play with the way she looks. Right, OK. So how about... I burn her hair off. But don't actually burn her hair off. So I call my hairdresser friend and say ‘can you collect me some hair cuttings please?’ I spend an hour tying hair in little bunches, trying to find a way to keep them hidden between my fingers... But things like punching, things like rough body play [pause] that could happen at the drop of a hat... with minimal negotiating. Because during a scene like that there is a lot more communication that happens as you do it.

The process of packing toys to go to an event, or setting up a play-space, is a form of planning, in that you cannot use what you do not have about you. Most tops would take a range of different things if playing away from home, as this enables them to respond to atmosphere or available equipment. Planning and anticipation do not always happen in isolation either, as pussikin describes: “My Master always goes quiet for a while before we have a play-date. We do do spontaneous things; you know messing around spanking with a spatula in the kitchen or whatever. But if we're really going to play he spends time considering things. Then he goes to the dungeon and moves stuff about... then he calls me. Or if we're at a club he likes to do a walkabout, with me on my lead, looking at what's there and what's going on”. Similarly, cate spoke of her Masters “plotting face” and the sense of excitement this created in her: “You get butterflies and, well I get fruit bats! ... It's you just know that it... you know you're going to be, your head's going to go to a certain place and it's going to be really lovely”.

Anticipation of all kinds contributes to the ultimate creation of liminality in the play-space; Ezzy (2014) notes that the impact of rituals which occurred during a festival was greater for those participants who had anticipated the event well in advance, while individuals who had forgotten they were attending until the last minute found the rituals to be less transformative. The anticipation signals the start of a shift from one kind of space to another kind of space and helps to make the cognitive understanding of what is going to happen “come alive in the physical acts” (Ezzy, 2014 p.45).

Pattern and Repetition

Our relationship is fluid. It's constantly exploring, developing.
Evolving. It evolves through every experience we share; it evolves

through our wider life, through life experiences, through what is happening to us at any given time.

– Molly

I'm not a fan of planning. Now that being said I plan. But not, you know, 9 to 9.15 there will be a flogging with this flogger, followed by this, to facilitate this end goal. My favourite thing in play, and mostly in life, is to subvert expectations. To go to say something and mean something but mean it in a different way to the way it has been taken. And that brings me such great joy whenever I can do that...

– Michael

Ritual is often understood as repetitive action. It is this perspective which characterises use of the concept within fields such as medicine, where it describes repetitive/obsessive behaviours associated with dysfunction (Favazza, 1996), and biology, where it describes animal courtship behaviours (Bouissac, 2014). The underlying implication of this characterisation is that ritual action is mechanistic and prescribed, with no room for improvisation, accident or fluidity. However, ritual is also a quality of action and an action is potentially different every time for the person performing it. Aey describes this potential variety in a piece of writing she shared with me about the enduring appeal of flogging: "It's like dancing. It has movement & rhythm. Big motor movement and fine. Loud and hard. Soft and sweeping. Steady and continuous – like a symphony – melodically moving through an area, intensity increasing, reaching crescendo, then fading into gentleness again. Steady and clear, definitive and focussed, movement around, dance forward and back on your feet, touch gently with falls and hands and nails". The possible variety in application creates a similar possibility of variety for the receiver, all arising from what looks like the same action. But, within the variety, there is still pattern: "Every time you make a strike, and the arse goes away from you and then comes back... there's a very

immediate pattern to that. Because there's acceptance of 'Yeah go on, give me another one'. Whereas if it stays away too long you hit it too hard, because they're not wanting the next one. It's that line where they're coming back because they have to not because they want to" (Piers).

These patterns of sensation and response create the possibility of increased intensity. The first time someone plays may be enjoyable, and sufficiently interesting to keep them coming back, but it is only through practice that the skills involved in both topping and bottoming are able to develop and allow the play to flow. Play is a dynamic event involving multi-directional patterns of sensation and response layered onto one another. Each movement that is made also makes us (LaMothe, 2015); to move differently results in thinking differently, even if the movement occurs in isolation. But during play each movement is intermingled with the movements of others, contributing to the matrix of natural forces within which we all live. This is part of "shaping a sense of self as the one who did" (LaMothe, 2015 p.103) but this self-who-did is thoroughly relational and the matrix of sensation, response and movement extends beyond the individual. Such a matrix necessitates elements of unpredictability, and any dynamic event must have the flexibility to encounter and absorb change, even if it does not deliberately create it.

Much BDSM play takes the form of action, reaction and adjustment. Scenes do not follow a set pattern; even an established couple engaging in favourite activities will have different experiences, and will vary the order and intensity of what they do. The deliberate recreation of an earlier scene is generally understood to be unachievable, as responses vary "from person to person and from time to time, and that duration of time can be seconds or days" (Barry). As a result of the top receiving and responding to the reactions they create, any intended pattern must be altered. Nevertheless, among the qualities which contribute to all different sessions of play are "patterns of bodily movement"

(LaMothe, 2015 p.156). In the distinction LaMothe implies between these patterns and ordered sequences of specific actions is the difference between the learning of a skill and the ultimate achievement of “an arc of embodied techniques” (O'Connor, 2007 p.130), which obviates the need to think consciously about the actions being performed; this state, where action follows action without any awareness of conscious intervention, is a flow-state (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). It is evident in individual descriptions of Dom-Space, but it is also a part of the matrix of connections between individuals. Freed from isolation within the individual, the flow-state becomes a “*social* process through which an event is experienced as taking on a life of its own for which the actors are merely channels – the play transforms them rather than they transforming the play” (Ezzy et al., 2009 p.399). Griff uses the analogy of becoming fluent in a language to describe the shift from everyday awareness to flow: “When you watch someone do something who is really good at it, it becomes entrancing. I think that also happens from the other point of view; if you do something that flows naturally it becomes meditative... [you] don't consciously think about it anymore, in the same way that I don't have to consciously think about translating things into English, because I don't translate things into English any more... There was a point when I was learning English... I was watching someone on stage doing a speech, and I knew exactly what he was saying but I wasn't sure what language he was saying it in”.

Ritual is an active interrelating of liminal points which construct a felt-necessity to complete a pattern shaped and demanded by the flow through the process (Ezzy et al., 2009). Each point flows to the next, reacting to circumstance and result. The process is fluid but shaping itself towards a satisfaction or sense of completion. The intuitive loop of action, reaction and response described by Oliver illustrates such a flow: “I get into where [pause] it's very careful listening to the other person's body, in terms of what feels good and what you're doing. And you get out of your head... You don't think ‘oh I've been spanking her this much, it's probably time I do something else now’ – which is how I used

to start, very much in my head – whereas actually I go now to what feels good to me... it's doing what feels right ... it's about listening to your intuition... Your feelings are almost never wrong, you just have to listen to them and listen to them in the right way". Moving through such a felt pattern allows both interior transformation, as individuals express "their own individual human bodily potential for becoming themselves and their worlds" (LaMothe, 2008 p.588), and the social dynamic of a ritual event constructed by a felt-necessity to complete the pattern demanded by the flow (Ezzy et al., 2009).

LaMothe describes ritual as being characterised by a patterned arc of movement that travels through warm-up, peak and cool-down. The warm-up consists of movements that both activate and orient the sensory awareness of an individual, and guides them to recognise whatever they currently feel as something that their ritual has the power to transform. In BDSM play, this is the opening sequence of actions decided on by the top and the initial response to them by the bottom, which may be continued with increasing intensity or abandoned for a new action that seeks to build on the sensory awareness created by the first. The patterns thus established are repeated and/or developed to reach the next stage – "a time of play" (2015 p.161). This is the stage where movement flows into movement, and ritual participants allow themselves to be "moved by powers that their culturally informed movements have stirred in them and bent them to perceive" (2015, p.160). It is the peak moment of the scene, when a point of sensation and/or emotion has been reached which cannot, at that time, be surpassed. Following this the intensity is reduced, a cool-down phase offering a time when the performers are able to "abide in their own renewed sense of resilience and resourcefulness" (2015 p.160).

It is this overall shape which is repeated and repeatable, by combining different embodied actions in different ways to create an "overall pattern of behaviour" within the space of the ritual (Houseman, 2008 p.414). Each scene is distinct, and must be so as many

different elements feed into its creation, but it is also created from patterns of learned and embodied actions and responses.

Performing and Exploring Boundaries

Everybody has an idea of how far they think they can go. Speak to most rational people they won't punch someone in the face unless circumstances [like] somebody threatened someone they love [pause], and then they will... Somebody saying 'oh no, I could never do XYZ', well how do you know you could never do it until you've tried it?

– Damien

The relationship between BDSM and boundary exploration deserves consideration in the context of ritual, because the transformative potential entailed in such exploration is a part of the reason why “before and after are not the same” (Houseman, 2005 p.76). This is not necessarily transformation in the sense of changes to cognitive understandings of self, other and world, although such change is a possibility. As with the Faunalia rituals described by Ezzy (2014), which work deliberately with fear, anxiety and uncertainty, the transformations accomplished by BDSM ritualising are somatic, emotional and relational in nature, bringing players deliberately face-to-face with challenging or ambiguous aspects of the self and of others.

Langdridge describes kink activities like mummification as offering a means to psychologically confront “ontical insecurity and existential anxiety” (2005 p.202). To play is to engage in a creative experiment which allows us to understand our existence has limits, and to meet them with courage. His analysis does not use the term ritual, but his description of processes deliberately creating genuine fear, within a situation that is also known to be temporary, is remarkably like the complex and ambiguous experiences of

disquieting and/or threatening pagan ritual that Ezzy describes (2011, 2014). In these rituals it becomes evident that fear and anxiety can become enriching and empowering experiences, and also that it is possible to “simultaneously feel attraction and revulsion, fear and excitement and pleasure and pain” (Langdridge, 2005). For Langdridge the activities creating such paradoxical experiences are experiments in living; for Ezzy they are “liminal ritual events [which] make space and time for transformations of soul” (2014 p.16). For me, an active attempt to address existential angst is a practice of personal religioning and, given that ritualising requires more of a performative suspension of disbelief than it does an explicit set of beliefs, I see no reason why both these descriptions cannot equally apply to play that allows or enables ways of “performing, thereby becoming identified with, our most troubling questions” (Grimes, 2002 p.257).

The element of performance is important. BDSM is not experienced as role-play since what happens in the play-space is really felt, both somatically and emotionally. In describing “rites of terror” Whitehouse and Lanman express surprise that these rituals are really painful, and truly terrifying. As they see it “the costs of participation seem to be out of all proportion to the imputed symbolic value” (2014 p.679). It might similarly be said that the levels of pain, fear, humiliation etc. experienced within a play-space are disproportionate to the role being played. The confusion in both cases would be the same: these ritual events are not symbolic or conceptual, they are real; players are not acting, but living an alternate reality. The reality of the experience gives it power, even when a symbolic meaning is ascribed afterwards. This account by pussikin illustrates how different realities become embodied for her during play:

This is something I've only done with my Master; I think I would only do it with my Master. This thing... it's like a bag you get in, and there's pockets inside for your arms and when its zipped up it fits pretty much skin-tight all over. There's

straps on the outside to tighten it up anywhere its loose. I couldn't even [pause] I couldn't even move my fingers... I've never been so still [pause]. So still. And with a blindfold as well, stuff always freaks me out more if I can't see. Some people like it... but for me it's scary. It was the closest to being totally immobile I've ever been and it was [pause] a serious head-fuck. Serious. Total. I don't know how long I was in it for... I mean I was whimpering within minutes. Maybe seconds. I ended up screaming. There's just something about not being able to move... something like [long pause] melting, maybe. Fading away. I can take a lot of pain. I mean I've been beaten until my skin starts to lift and been happy to carry on but this [pause] I think, maybe, pain kind of [pause] solidifies me. It says... that I'm here. I'm real. And [pause] I guess that I matter enough... that someone would take the time to hurt me, put the energy into it. But that immobility was the opposite to that... Am I really real? [laughs] And that tells you all my hang-ups, right there!

Although this experience was genuinely distressing it was also affirming; pussikin feels she learnt something from it, "something about how I... touch the world". The vulnerability needed for that requires a level of trust pussikin could not give anyone other than her Master, and thus the experience is not simply one of facing fear but also of trust given and justified. When Cee says that she "took somebody out cross-dressed and I made them post a letter" the nature of the edge being encountered is different, but this can still be "the edgiest play they've ever had... to him that was 'oh my God, that was too much. But I did it'". The dynamic of fear and trust is the same, resulting in a peak (or depth) of dysphoria which is permitted and made acceptable via the relationship between the players. Cee says this is "almost like going to a priest isn't it, for confessions... You've gone through this huge emotional 'I've done this father' and then you've dumped it, and it's done with".

This kind of play is likely to require aftercare of some kind, ranging from time spent cuddling to extended periods of reflection. Aftercare was important and enjoyable for most people I spoke with, but one exception was Demon, who plays primarily with pain and says he is “attracted to masochists”. He responded to the idea of aftercare with “Oh arse, stick ‘em in a corner!” and said that “luckily” he had never played with anyone who needed aftercare. His descriptions of his own play were simpler and more specific than other tops I spoke with, for example “I tied her to a cross, and I went through my toys from soft to hard. I played with a toy until she said ‘pause’... but she knew if she stopped me the next toy was worse”, and he made no reference to limits in any context other than pain levels. He was also the person who gave the fewest indicators that kink was a gestalt in his life, saying “it's only fucking with a variation”. This could be taken as an indication that a sense of kink as gestalt is more likely with certain kinds of play, but it is certainly evidence that no universal claims can be made regarding these matters.

But despite this exception, many people deliberately play with boundaries in ways that confront matters of ultimate concern, and that this in turn contributes to processes of meaning- and world-making. The experiences created enable transformation that is somatic in nature, but likely to be reflected on later. Because they are shared, such experiences forge a sense of kinship and connection, not restricted to personal relationships but contributing to the recognition of a kink community, and to the fusion of kink with other aspects of personal self-concept (Whitehouse and Lanman, 2014).

Performing and Exploring Relationship

You can marry someone in vanilla life, and you can get divorced.

You might be Catholic and you might say you never will, but you know you can and you just stop being a Catholic. But if someone

has their hands around your throat, and they make a mistake... You can't undo that. So, the level of trust is very different, I think.

– Aey

[Play] is part of an interchange... It's very important to me. It's beyond the 'meet somebody on line, go out and enact something'. For some people that's all they want. It wouldn't work for me. It's that depth which really defines whether it is BDSM or not.

– Barry

The fluid unfolding of play is formed through the enactment of relationship within the play-space. As the actions which shape the space are performed, they draw elements from pre-existing disparate domains into the totality of the new world being made. For Houseman and Severi this process is the key structuring element for ritual, creating a characteristic “*relational* field” (1998 p.167) which gives a ritual its particular form. They view ritual as a descriptor for a particular mode of action, rather than a typology of acts. It is not only the creation of relationship which characterises this mode, but a “particular type of relational configuration” (1998 p.262), constructed by and through performed actions and interactions. Within a ritual space, people live “exceptional” (Houseman, 2008 p.416) relationships that are polysemous and/or multiplex and which entail a “condensation of nominally contrary modes of relationship... recognised as distinct from those normally occurring outside the ritual frame”(Houseman and Severi, 1998 p.262).

One such exceptional form of relationship is enacted within play-spaces. During play apparent opposites such as praise and mockery, care and hurting, power and powerlessness, wanting cessation and wanting escalation, are “dramatically fused” (Houseman, 2008 p.417), as the reality of the play-space exists in tension with the ordinary world. The relationships enacted here may spill over the edges of the space containing

them, in the same way the qualities of the experience overflow and become gestalt. The connection between BDSM players is intimate; play is a process of weaving that bond “tighter and brighter” (Aey), or a thing that “communicates the ineffable between us” (Michael), as the experience of the relationship is “driven deeply, by repeated practice and performance, into the marrow” (Grimes, 2002 p.5).

This “particular process of recontextualisation” (Houseman and Severi, 1998 p.423) does not orient participants to any particular understanding of the relationships they enact, nor does it directly offer answers to problems or tensions from the world beyond the ritual. Instead it provides “experiential grounds” (1998 p.424) for the commitment of the participants to the reality of their enacted relationships. It is the fact of the performance and the experience of the enactment that grounds the “irrefutable yet difficult-to-define ‘truths’ they are held to enact” (1998 p.421).

Gestalt Practice as Rituals of Religioneering

When I'm doing dishes or whatnot there's no part of me that's sexually aroused but I do enjoy those submissive feelings, if you will. I feel like I'm in my place and that this is what I'm supposed to be doing.

– Matt

To me it means my life. It is who I am... I am just a person within the Scene that, over the years, has tried so many different things... I've tried to go vanilla after discovering it and I couldn't.

– Kaz

Not all religious practice is ritual but, if people seek a sense of the religious in their lives, ritual practice may form a part of that religioneering process. BDSM can be understood as a form of practice which makes manifest personal religiosity in the way that it

contributes to the processes of “making the invisible visible,... concretising the order of the universe, the nature of human life... and the various dimensions and possibilities of human interiority itself... in order to render them visible and tangible” (Orsi, 2005 pp.73-74).

Gestalt offers a means of considering the ideas of value or specialness in relation to specific occasions or activities without necessarily relying on either a transcendent Other or an established cultural tradition to provide it. BDSM can infuse the everyday, but BDSM play is outside the everyday by its very nature, as ritual is distinct from everyday religion. I suggest that when play becomes gestalt, it can be viewed as process of un-named ritualising, a personal un-named religioning.

The experience created by play has qualities that ritual has, and can be understood as a ritual in an experiential way : because the “before and after are not the same” (Houseman, 2005 p.76); because the nature of the experience that creates that before and after is self-validating and difficult to conceptualise in terms other than the enactment of the ritual itself (Houseman, 2008); because play is not merely a set of repeated actions, or a simple telling of stories but a process of enacting “particular realities” (Houseman, 2008 p.414), with participants being fully aware of this; and because, during and through this enactment of reality, spaces are created which are distinct from the everyday but also “really real, a complete and filled out existential reality – but in its own terms” (Kapferer, 2005 p.47).

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how the experiential qualities and structural nature of play are the same as those found in the patterns of action that are studied as ritual. This is more than an implicit similarity: the process of creating the as-if world of the play-space is deliberate and conscious; the relationships are real and lived through, and their paradoxical nature is fully experienced; change between before and after is tangible and

recognised, and the experience defies adequate explanation. Used as a critical category for framing action, ritual sheds a new light on the structures and dynamics of BDSM and the significance it can hold for practitioners. Understood as gestalt practice, the rituals of BDSM contribute to discourse about the nature of religion as an active and creative process of religioning.

In the following chapter I will return to the concept of gestalt, and examine how the disparate elements which contribute to the value of kink in an individual life combine to create that emergent sense and contribute to personal religioning.

12 – Conclusion: Gestalt Kink, Gestalt Religion

Look into our eyes. When we return with those bruises, do we walk taller and stronger? When we touch our cuts, are we more serene? When we give up our power, do we grow more sure of ourselves? When we accept power over another, do we learn more compassion? Do we return from the Underworld better for the journey? That's how you know, those of you who are worried, whether we're doing it right.

– (Kaldera, 2006 pp.7-8)

Do not be fooled: though it may come in forms of play, or sensual exploration, or bliss, this is the work of our souls. This journey has the potential for turning the flax, the straw, of our beings into the gold of potential.

– (Harrington, 2009 p.7)

My argument is that sometimes a person's kink can be, for them, other than the sum of its constituent parts. It becomes a gestalt, a whole to which each of the themes explored in the preceding chapters contributes. Such a gestalt is a contributor to the constant, dynamic process of exploration and creation of world and self that is religioning. The concept of gestalt has provided a spine, from which individual analytic themes explored in the chapters descend. Thus, each theme can be understood and explored separately in relation to BDSM, while also being one strand among the many which contribute to the whole of the gestalt. The selected themes do not constitute an exhaustive list of all possible strands which could be woven into personal gestalt kink, but they are the themes which emerged most strongly from my research conversations.

In exploring specifics while retaining a sense of the whole I have sought to engage with the fuzzy complexities that seem to me a more accurate reflection of human lives than impermeable lines drawn around human behaviours to corral them into clearly delineated categories. Understanding experience as constructed from multiple ingredients means recognising that discrete experiences may contribute to the creation of a gestalt but simply having an experience is not the whole story. There is no intrinsic quality which must, through its presence, turn any experience into a 'Religious Experience'. It is possible to engage in the most sacred rites of a named religious tradition as a rote exercise in conformity, as the expression of an aspect of personal identity, as a deeply felt connection with an Other, or as a fluid and flexible combination of these (and other) qualities. Similarly, there is no essential component which divides the kinky from the non-kinky. Engaging with blurred boundaries and experiential qualities allows kink to be considered within the category of the religious, but I have not sought to create a kink-as-sacred category that would *require* the activity (or experiences created through it) to mean more, or to be more, than a mutually pleasurable interlude. My argument is that sometimes kink practice and experience *is* more than that, contributing to dynamic processes of personal religioneering. People creatively find and develop practices which bring something into new focus, or which build into a process of first constructing and then exploring the sense of that activity as gestalt – as more or other than the sum of its constituent parts. Lyng's edgeworking sky-divers (2005a), Snyder's nature-loving fly fishers (2007), Taylor's Soul-Surfers (2007), and Sanford's white-water kayakers (2007) all appear to be taking hold of something emerging from their practice – a practice that began as a leisure activity but has become filled up to the point where something new spills over the boundaries to be gathered. The experiences are felt, reflected on, and valued, and the experience is then sought out again so that the continued practice can enable the gestalt to become once more explicit and/or tangible.

To identify when religioning is in process is not a matter of identifying locations, events, behaviours or mysterious essences. There is no more necessity that a Muslim reciting the Shahada be actively weaving that experience into their lives in a purposeful or meaningful way than there is such necessity for a person being tied to a bondage wheel. People can, and do, go through the motions; they can find comfort in habit or feel rooted by tradition; they can seek to conform, or to please other people in their lives. So, to understand what is going on during a given time, and what is done with it afterwards, it is necessary to ask the doer. When the experience is overwhelming, substantially somatic (or otherwise non-linguistic), boundary blurring or subject shattering, it is also necessary to accept that such questioning will not produce clear and unambiguous responses. In this research the conversations I had with players gave rise to reflections on the nature of play-space, the process of creating such a space and the bodily and relational experiences within it, of kink as boundary exploration and as identity construction.

Filling-Up-Spilling-Over

We got to this incredible, incredible space where this person is tuned into me, I'm tuned into them. They like nipple play and we've got all suction cups on, we've got them sort of connected up to the ceiling. And that person was able to take [pause] I don't mean pain as in to hurt somebody, this is pain for euphoric pleasure and the submission to somebody else. Wanting to have that pain going through their body not only for their own pleasure but for the pleasure of another person. And I was pushing that person, I was connecting with their eyes and just telling them that I'm going to take them further and further and further, and they're wanting to give that, and you can see it in them but you've also got to know

where not to push too far... It's very difficult to put this into words, actually.

– Cee

BDSM play produces experience of a nature that is hard to capture in words. One possible analogy is the process of filling a container, like a glass. Creating a play-space establishes such a container, to be gradually filled with a medley of different elements, like sensation, emotion and intimacy. Play-space is built up and shaped through a continual loop of giving, receiving and responding until, when the glass is filled to the brim, the other-where is brought fully into existence and the players wholly immersed. With a glass that is completely full the liquid bulges in a convex meniscus. It is held by the surface tension, just as the play-space is maintained by continuing the giving and receiving loop. Adding one more drop to the glass brings the liquid pouring over the edge, far more of it than just the single drop which broke the tension. At the zenith of a scene, the play likewise over-spills the edges of the play-space, creating experiential change which remains with the players long after, and infuses other aspects of their lives. The sense that the play experience can no longer be fully contained and explained by framing BDSM just as sex, or just as leisure emerges; BDSM begins to become, for that individual, a gestalt.

This filling-up-spilling-over creates intense experiences which may include a sense of flow or transcendence, or bring players to a point when the edges of the self are blurred or lost. Such experiences are significant both in the moment they occur and as foci for future reflection. In this thesis I have explored elements built upon and from that over-spilling, including: the exploration of 'as-if' realities, the dynamics of power and helplessness, personal and communal identity, self and relational knowledge, deep intimacy and personal spiritual meaning. All these things infuse a person's understanding of their own kink in their own lives and give rise to the sense of it as gestalt: a practice

within which people find more, or from which they get more, than a breakdown of the constituent parts would show.

The traditional rites of established religions may likewise serve as a means of highlighting or foregrounding a sense of gestalt that already exists within a community or culture, creating a similar process of filling-up-spilling-over. However, I do not propose this process to be either the essence of all religion, or essential for any religion; I offer it as one possible means of creating special experiences which contribute to religioning. The 'specialness' occurs in the movement of the thing beyond the sum of the elements from which it is made, the spilling-over the edges of its container. In what is constructed from that spilling-over I locate the religious as it is for an individual. The process of filling-up to create the spilling-over is a process of bringing forward and making tangible; as I have shown kink identity is brought forward and made explicit through play. In my view, there is no restriction on the practices which can become gestalt in this way.

Crucibles of Context

Basically, when you go flying in subspace you are going on inward journey. You're flying, and you can fly very high out there... When I go into subspace I come out of it fully energised. I'm getting something from [pause] I'm getting a calm, a focus, a whole different perspective on life.

— Javelin

An experience which has spilled over the boundaries of easy definition, as play-experience can, is a kind of experience likely to be reflected upon later and refined through that reflection, and/or through seeking further such experiences. The container of the play-space allows a bubble of experiencing to be perceived as isolated from the constant stream. Such a marked-out Experience constitutes a crucible within which particular

fragments of sensation, emotion, cognition, proprioception, interoception, etc. are combined, concentrated and calcined. Some will be intensified, and others will be lost, so that a specific BDSM scene might come to be felt, for example, as wholly about pain even when other sensations were involved. This concentration of particular elements makes up the kind of vivid and enduring episodic memory on which people tend to reflect subsequently (Atkinson and Whitehouse, 2011). Both felt and thought components are refined, reflected on, and refined again in an iterative process that results in a personal sense of the significance of that experience for the individual, their life and their world. An experience of profound kink thus carries the potential for transformation, not only in a somatic and transient sense (created within the play-space and fading with it), but at other levels also. As the memory is refined – somatically, cognitively, emotionally – it contributes to the ways an individual relates to themselves, to others, to boundaries and to existential concerns.

I have argued that the process of creating play-space and the experiences therein constitutes ritual, in that they are a purposeful exercise in creating a crucible of experience. Grimes observes that anything can be seen as ritual, but he also suggests that there is a difference, of some kind, between a Catholic attending mass and a Catholic engaged in cleaning their house. This is not a difference of the religious versus the non-religious but instead the distinction between being ritual and being *seen* as ritual. I have identified kink experiences falling on both sides of this distinction, but where the qualities of experience involved were less disparate than such a separation might imply. My view of ritual as the practice of foregrounding a gestalt, passes beyond the issue of who it is who does the seeing and the labelling of what they see, and asks instead whether the container is filled to the point of spilling over; whether the experience of the practice becomes more than the practice itself can contain. Understanding Grimes “definitional threshold” (2002 p.28) between rites and ritualising as experiential rather than linguistic allows practices

that might otherwise be sited on either side to be understood as aspects of religione, when they are being felt and used in such a way. Gestalt kink can thus be understood as an aspect of this lived and living process.

The qualities of experiences that contribute to religione are not changed by the choice to use participants preferred term of play, the critical category of ritual or the broader term of religione to name the process which creates them. What religione offers is a useful frame for exploring practices which are not necessarily part of any named religious tradition but which nonetheless contribute to personal world-, meaning and story-making.

In sum if religion is a gestalt, then the religious for an individual can be constructed from any practices, experiences, ideas and social milieu in which they find that gestalt element. The practices that bring the gestalt into the foreground of their experience for a time, that make it explicit, are the practices that express and explore individual constitutions of the religious. Viewing experience as a crucible, refining personal outcomes from the concentrated stuff of which it is made, allows understanding of how a given experience can be part of religione for one person and not for another.

An Emergent Sense

It's so difficult to put it into words. I mean even if you can remember an exact sequence of events, which isn't always the case [pause] you can't necessarily articulate how it felt, or what your headspace was like, or what the connection was like or just [pause]... One of my very occasional play partners, he wanted to discuss it afterwards, and so I did write it up for him. And that was [pause] interesting, because it does help you to get a sort of a sequence of events and a sort of when this happened I felt this... I think how was

that for you, immediately afterwards would be a bit like 'my brain is made of mush, and... I can't remember what my name is and [pause] I don't know'.

– Ivy

Gestalt is an emergent sense arising from the complex and dynamic combination of many different elements, and as such it is not possible to directly perceive it separately from the totality of the phenomena from which it emerges. The chapters of this thesis identify elements which can contribute, but a sense of the whole is still necessary. Living religion is a “multi-faceted, often messy or even contradictory amalgam” (McGuire, 2008b p.208) which has a practical (rather than a logical) coherence, making sense to the individual and so ‘working’ within their life. This means the lustre of gestalt might appear in a variety of forms, as my research conversations showed. Kink might be described as: intensely meaningful in broad and abstract terms; as a means of making abstract knowledge of the complexity of things and the inadequacy of the labels given them into a lived reality; as contributing to the ways in which the self is understood or part of a process of connecting individuals to the world and to each other; as a core aspect of identity; as a vehicle for exploring experiential living bodies; for facing the edge between life and death; as a creator of intense, profound and/or boundary-blurring experiences that can “raise one's tolerance for the ungraspable and uncategorisable” (Kraemer, 2014 p.98), thus challenging assumptions about the world.

Gestalt Kink

I think that people [pause] they attain things during these moments [of play], they learn things in these moments. It's very intuitive. It's knowledge about yourself that comes from nowhere, and if that's not a spiritual experience what is?

– Friedrich

Yeah, [BDSM] it really is [pause] It's definitely part of things. It definitely helped me push past that next, impossibly, inflexible barrier, that part of me... that part of you that thinks I'll never do that, I can't.

– Rita

While my participants encompassed the full range of attitudes to the terms religion and spirituality – from accepting both to accepting neither – almost all agreed that BDSM, for them, is more or other than sex, than physical pleasure, than performed identity or than any other simple, single-focus explanation. They felt that it added a dimension of fulfilment to their life which could not be easily explained, a feeling this thesis has presented as a sense of gestalt. The different ways in which this was expressed makes it appropriate to give them the last words on this hard-to-say, strongly-felt, matter.

Simon/Effie explains that kink is “meaningful for me” because “it gives me sensations and it gives me thoughts... to re-examine life through this experience”, and this examination is fulfilling and life-enhancing. Mistress Marina observes that “when you put the right people in it, the right circumstances, the right things [pause] you get something more... There is definitely something in it over and above the ingredients”. Molly also describes play as “a kind of bigger thing; it's this whole thing of doing this, of putting myself here, of giving in this way, of receiving in this way, to put myself here”. She sees BDSM as powerful – “it's a hammer” – which can be positive, but doesn't have to be: “It can be enlightening; it can be freeing; it can be abusive and it can be distressing and it can be damaging”. The hammer can smash things or it can “create something absolutely beautiful.” Cee emphasised the need to take a holistic view, saying that “within the BDSM world what you're exploring is not something with a label. It is so far, far diverse, in

another dimension and another experience. It is almost like a sixth, seventh, eighth sense that we haven't a great understanding of yet". She says that her involvement with kink "has really made me complete. I feel very complete and very content as a person. Because I have obviously explored myself through meeting all these wonderful people, but I have also had a greater understanding of society and what their needs are". Oliver emphasises connection, saying that BDSM "creates a closeness that other things don't. It can be really beautiful... you have that moment, or however long it takes when you feel so close to another human being... You go deeper." Griff described BDSM as one among many strands that he uses to fill "the hole in my life [that] needs to be filled by me. By knowing who I am... that knowledge of knowing who you are. BDSM is part of it. And if I hadn't had BDSM I don't think there is anything else I could have done that would have filled the same void". Although he is clear that BDSM is one among many elements in developing this self-knowledge, he also says that "it's one of the more meaningful things in my life". Kaz goes a step further when she says "to me [BDSM] means my life. It is who I am... It makes me feel that I am whole. And without BDSM in my life I am not whole." For Madeleine kink is "extremely meaningful" in its relationship both to what it is to be human, and to "a big Other" of some kind. She sees her kink as "being completely and utterly intentional" and this "matters a great deal to me because it is I think, in a way, what makes me human. And, especially when it comes to enduring pain – the ability to do that, the ability to sublimate it, or to get on top of it and ride it is... is to me an act of great human control". She also sees a "dynamic of sacrifice" where "you are giving something up, you are allowing this... I feel the same way when I'm topping in that I'm bringing this thing out for this other. For this Other. I am enabling the [pause] emergence of something into this... It is a kind of [pause] well, it's magic, in that sense of primitive ideas of magic and the fact that they buy you trespass into a place you shouldn't be. They are the cost for stepping over the line of taboo".

Looking Forward

No two dances are the same. Your tale will not be the same tale as told in these pages. And yet, oh and yet. And yet the tales will be told. Your tales, my tales, the tales of the world. Because we are the keepers of the dreams, we are the weavers of the tapestry.

– (Harrington, 2010 p.238)

In drawing out some of the elements that contribute to the sense of kink as gestalt I have touched on areas of further interest in the study of both kink and religion, and I expand briefly on some of those here.

Approaching kink as I have in this thesis offers a practical example of applying the framework of scene (Moberg and Ramstedt, 2016) to non-traditional religious practices in a way which recognises the complexity and possibility of differing interpretations in such spaces. My interpretation has drawn upon ideas of religion which extend beyond the common demarcation of that concept, and it therefore opens new avenues for the study of scenes as spaces and communities which contribute to religioning, regardless of the relationship of any chosen scene to established religious institutions. With its explicit recognition of BDSM as ‘what it is that we do’, the BDSM Scene offers a useful model through which the complex processes of structuring identity and community in the contemporary world can be approached. This approach need not be restricted to communities which self-define as Scenes; a consideration of recognised and established religious communities as Scenes would bring together what it is they do, both within and outside designated religious spaces, allowing a more integrated and holistic approach to the religioning processes taking place in and through the scene. Understanding how Scenes are constructed and engaged with will enrich understanding of how and why the strong hypermodern themes of individualism and autonomy do not simply result in fragmented

and isolated practices, through which everyone seeks their own spiritual path by themselves and never communicates or shares it with anyone.

Religioning, and the concept of gestalt, are not only relevant to new and personalised forms of practice. Reading the Torah, or performing puja may or may not be gestalt practices, and may or may not contribute to personal religioning in a variety of ways. These concepts allows the recognition that not all engagement with traditional or institutional forms of religion works in the same way, or occupies the same place in individual lives. The approach also allows new, idiosyncratic forms of practice to be placed in the same broad category as traditional religious forms. By recognising the sphere of the religious, rather than casting institutional or hierarchical religion as the essential form religion must take, the field becomes both broader and richer. It may be more complex to research religioning that involves more than beliefs in deity, expressed through established and approved practice, but it also seems more likely to offer a better understanding of not only what people appear to be doing, but “what they think they are doing when they do what they do” (Partridge, 2004 p.145). The human element, and the creative interpretative processes through which human beings engage with their surroundings, is always present even in the most orthodox and doctrinal religious groups. It seems likely that within such a group everything officially connected with or sanctioned by their religion will carry a lustre of gestalt. However, for some religious groups and individuals only specific elements of belief and/or practice will do so, and for others no part of their tradition gives rise to that sense. Achieving a better understanding of this can only deepen understanding of the significance and role of religious identity, performance and community. Each individual treads their own path of religioning; as they do so they draw on the shared resources of any religious tradition they have named as their own. But there are other elements involved – the label of that tradition which they have accepted carries expectations and associations and they will have personal interpretations of those. Personal experiences

within that community and its shared spaces, and the embedding of those within a wider cultural milieu, are all contributors to personal placement within the world. The lived processes involved in weaving these factors together, understood as religioning, brings the study of what traditionally religious people do outside of their dedicated religious spaces (lived religion) closer to the study of traditional or doctrinal religious forms and practices. Rather than separating them into distinct areas 'the religious' becomes a single sphere, within which people individually and continually weave their religion using all available resources.

People religioning outside a named structure of religion are still within this sphere of the religious, and can still feel or discover a sense of gestalt in aspects of religious form or practice with which they have no institutional affiliation. There is further scope for study here, moving beyond syncretism to understand the multi-directional flows of religious resources throughout the cultural milieu and the ways in which individuals connect with, select from, develop and feedback those resources. For example, the value still placed on traditional wedding practices might be understood as a manifestation of a sense of gestalt. These kinds of interaction, where the self-labelled 'not religious' choose to engage with what is traditionally understood to be religious, offer fertile ground for exploration of the role and form religioning takes within a hypermodern society.

It is also worth considering the issue of experience, its nature and its significance within both the study and the practice of religioning. In exploring BDSM my focus on the experience of play highlighted the importance of the play experience as collaborative, complementary, co-constructed and/or interdependent. The association of ineffability with religious experience has the effect of presenting such experiences as isolated within the individual, not only beyond critique but beyond sharing. The nature of BDSM play, and the felt connections to others that form an important part of it, demonstrates that not only can

profound non-linguistic experiences be shared but also shaped and experienced collaboratively. This clear example may suggest routes into less clear territory, such as the interactions of priest and worshipper in creating the experience of communion, or the involvement of multiple pagans in casting and shaping their circle. The presence within the Kink Scene of solitary practitioners (a group as yet almost wholly unstudied) offers opportunities for comparison between collaborative and solo experience, including whether the latter are in fact as isolated from others within the Scene as such a categorisation implies. The difference between play in public and private spaces can only enrich this understanding, by considering how an attentive audience and inattentive passers-by may play parts in the overall construction. Considering collaborative experience within traditional religious contexts requires the important recognition that the others involved in the construction of any given experience need not be human.

There are, in short, many ways in which the argument of this thesis could be developed in relation to other scenes and phenomena which might further enrich the study of lived religion and its gestalts.

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Appendix A – A Kink Glossary

Age-Play: assuming a persona of a different age (usually younger) in the context of role-play

Bondage: restraining or restricting movement

Bottom: general term for the person on the receiving end during a scene; often used to signal situations where no power-exchange is felt to be taking place

Consensual non-consent: agreement to engage in play as if no consent has been given; usually involving agreement not to use safe-words. Since specifics are not generally discussed beforehand, and even the time may be unknown to the bottom, it is a strong expression of trust

CP: ‘Corporal Punishment’; play which involves spanking, flogging, caning and similar forms of impact play. Can be used to describe a specific community within the kink Scene

D/s: ‘Dominance and submission’; often a descriptor for a lifestyle relationship where the power-exchange exists for the duration of the relationship

Dominant: person who takes control during a power-exchange. Often shortened to Dom/Domme

Edge-play: forms of play seen as more extreme or risky

Electro-play: forms of play involving electricity such as e-stim (TENS technology) and violet wands (glass electrodes which apply low current, high voltage, high-frequency electricity)

Figging: the insertion of peeled root ginger into the anus or vagina

Fire-play: forms of play involving fire; including brushing burning torches or sparklers across the skin and igniting fuel on the skin

Flogging: beating with a many-tailed implement; by contrast whipping is generally understood to refer to a single lash or tail

Hard limit: an activity in which a player has declared they do not wish to participate, or come close too

Hook pull: hooks are inserted into the skin and then attached to fixed points, or to another person, enabling the pierced individual to pull the piercing against resistance

Hook suspension: suspending the body via hooks pierced through the skin

Kinbaku: 'tight binding'; another term for shibari, elaborate rope bondage based on Japanese tradition

Kink: the opposite of vanilla (normal/conventional); often used interchangeably with BDSM to describe the overall Scene. Also a designation of personal interests within the portfolio of kink activities – 'my kinks are...'

Knife-/Blade-play: forms of play involving knives, run over the skin for sensation or used to create fear; most people who engage in cutting use scalpels or razor blades for a cleaner wound

Lifestyle: descriptor for a 24/7 D/s relationship, where the power exchange performed during play is understood to run throughout the relationship

Mind-fucking: creating dissonance between expectation/mental experience and physical reality, for example the top creates the belief that they will cut their submissive with a large sharp knife then runs a blunt metal knife across their skin where they cannot see it

Mummification: bondage intended to wholly immobilise and/or isolate; commonly done with cling-film or specially designed bags

Needle-play: inserting needles or surgical staples into skin, piercing without inserting jewellery

Play: active engagement in forms BDSM activity; not all kinks involve play, for e.g. wearing and/or enjoying the visual aesthetic of latex could be considered a kink

Power exchange: a situation where one person has given power over themselves and their bodily integrity to another person

Predicament bondage: bondage in a position intended to cause discomfort and/or fatigue

Primal: can describe an identity or a form of play; focus on unfiltered raw emotion and reaction

Safe-word: agreed word that can be spoken to stop or slow-down play, either temporarily or altogether; includes non-verbal signals.

Scene/session: names given to BDSM encounter or periods of play

Shibari: 'to tie'; another term for kinbaku, elaborate rope bondage based on Japanese tradition

Soft limit: an activity in which a player has declared they do not wish to participate, but which they might be willing to approach in the right circumstances

Spanko: abbreviation of spankophile; a person interested in all aspects and forms of spanking

Spiritual BDSM: engaging in BDSM play for an explicit spiritual purpose, such as achieving an altered state

Submissive: the person who gives up their power in a power exchange

Suspension: bondage which supports the weight of the body off the ground

Top: a general term for the person on the giving end during a scene; often used to signal situations where no power-exchange is felt to be taking place

Topping-from-the bottom: where the partner taking the bottom role is directing what happens during the scene

Vacuum bed: a latex bag or envelope from which the air can be sucked, fitting the container around the body inside it; a form of mummification bondage

Vanilla: Anything that is felt not to be kink

Appendix B – Research Participants

Aey is happy to be described as a Dominant, a Mistress or a top. She considers herself spiritual, and sees her kink as being involved in her spirituality because “it has that connectedness. As a spiritual person I think that everything is connected with energy”.

Barry is a lifestyle Dom in a committed relationship with poppy. He doesn't see himself as religious or spiritual, but considers his kink to be meaningful “given it's a part of me it has to be If you were to say it isn't you're almost questioning ‘do I deserve to be here?’”

Bea describes herself as a submissive and is in a committed relationship with Dee. She would not use either religious or spiritual to describe herself but says she can see kink and spirituality occupying “that same kind of space... I think there is a connection there. It's just one I'd never thought about before”.

Ben is a Dom. He is a Hindu; he describes religion as “the pathway to spirituality” and spirituality as “where there are no distinctions between you and other beings”. It is spirituality that “is the material that makes me, the material that makes the diamond. BDSM is a part of that diamond”.

Cate identifies as a slave and lives in a committed lifestyle relationship. She is a pagan, but considers this spirituality rather than religion. Spirituality “means that you're in touch with yourself” and BDSM is “very spiritual” because “it's all to do with where it takes you in your mind”.

Cee is a professional Fetish Practitioner who dislikes most of the conventional terminology associated with kink because of the associated stereotypes. Cee says that spirituality is “my connection with the greater energy in the world and the energy within other human

beings” and kink is a meaningful part of this “because it’s the interaction of two like-minded souls ... that are wanting to experience something on mutual ground”.

Colin is a switch and a cross-dresser within school role-play scenarios. He sees religion and spirituality as the same thing, and uses neither term about himself. His kink is “terribly important”, especially the “powerful” experiences of cross-dressing. He says play “takes me somewhere different... [and] I feel so different” in play-space.

Damien identifies primarily as a top, but prefers to “introduce myself by my name”. He describes religion as a “desire to have something beyond the physical” and it is distinguished from spirituality only because of the “rules and restrictions and dogma”. He is spiritual because he looks “at the world beyond, I see things that I marvel at... that interconnectivity”. Play contributes to this in the moments when “it’s just flowed and it’s just felt [pause] good. Right. And I’ve had that same sort of feeling”.

Dee describes himself as a top or a Dom, and is in a committed relationship with Bea. He sees religion as a “form of control” and spirituality as “a sense of yourself and what is around you”. Dee says that his kink does not currently contribute to this “but it does have that potential”.

Demon identifies as a sadist; he would accept the label Dom but he would not choose it. He is anti-religion, which he sees as “weakness” and also spirituality - “girly rubbish”. He is the only one of my research participants who minimised the importance of his kink as being “only fucking with a variation”. But he also described kink in terms which imply something more, saying play is performance of his identity as “an outsider”, and like poetry or art in that it is “pure self-expression”.

Digi is a switch within his relationship with Twisted. Their exploration of kink has been a journey, which has become meaningful as they have travelled further: "it's something that ours. No one else has this that we have". Digi is not religious but thinks "there are things that we don't understand". Spirituality is found in "connectedness... [and] having an openness or to be aware of other people and your environment and what's going on around you" but Digi is "too much of an engineer to be spiritual".

Esteban is a practitioner of self-bondage. At the time we spoke he had not fully explored his kinks with anyone else, but felt he was best described as a switch. He dislikes the term religion but says "I get spiritual satisfaction from doing what I do.... If it didn't do that then I wouldn't be doing it in the first place".

Friedrich is a Dom in a committed relationship with Rita. He feels negatively about religion, which he describes as a "man-made constraint" for controlling people's thoughts, but he considers himself spiritual. BDSM can be spiritual as people "attain things during these moments, they learn things in these moments. It's very intuitive. It's knowledge about yourself that comes from nowhere, and if that's not a spiritual experience what is?"

Griff describes himself as a primal, which he says is the best fit for his kink interests but not a perfect one. Griff considers his kink to be meaningful because "a meaningful thing is something you use to create, or adjust or check your own identity. And I think that me being kinky ... the skills I have learned, the traits of my personality that have had something to do with it, have had a profound effect on me as a person in other boxes of my life".

Ian identifies as a top. He dislikes the concepts of both religion and spirituality and says his kink is important to him personally because it offers "the freedom to... manifest the...the things I want to do in real life". He also sees a political edge to it in the potential to

challenge “an enormous hypocrisy” around sexuality and monogamy. Ian is polyamorous and has a play relationship with Rita.

Ivy identifies as submissive. She is a witch, and does connect paganism with religion. She sees spirituality as a broader concept “to include religion but also to include people who don't identify as religious... But who have an aspect to their life that is about something more than the physical and mental”. Kink is a part of this because “I don't think that my religion makes me able to inhabit my world any better... whereas I think BDSM perhaps does”.

Javelin is a switch who identifies as a sacred harlot, following a clear spiritual path that requires Javelin to educate others about kink, sex, gender and sexuality as well as spirituality. Javelin is a practitioner of spiritual BDSM and identifies as a pagan. However, paganism is not a religion to Javelin, but a spirituality which “gives you the tools to change yourself”.

Kaz says if she has to label herself she chooses ‘Domme’ but overall she avoids labels because they imply restrictions on what she enjoys. She associates religion with manmade systems of belief and says these are “not pure”; spirituality is pure because “we don't control it”. While she values her kink greatly she feels meaningful is “too deep” a term to apply to something that is “just part of who I am” but this part of her identity is extremely important “and it will always be who I am”.

Kris identifies as a top. He is married to a submissive but says that they do not play together as she had a Master before he discovered his own kinks. He does not feel he is religious because “it's been a long time since I've been to church”, and he does not see himself as spiritual either although this is “a grey area”. He says BDSM gives his life “a richness” that would otherwise be lacking.

Kyndyl does not give themselves a specific kink label, saying they seem to be primarily sub but are unsure as they have played all roles. Kyndyl is a pagan who considers that “my spirituality and BDSM are pretty much mixed together”. As well as more casual play Kyndyl engages in deliberately created kink ritual and says that “for the primary deities I work with I would consider myself their property”.

Madeleine describes herself as a sadomasochist, as she enjoys playing with both giving and receiving pain. She says “if I have any religion it is extremely private and idiosyncratic”, and considers her kink to be an aspect of that “in terms of a practice that gives your life meaning”. She considers herself less spiritual “because I am so language-bound” whereas spirituality is “more intuitive, more emotional ... not mitigated by law. And I mean law in the big sense, of the organised, structured world sense.”

Marie describes herself as both a submissive and a masochist, although she is less likely to use the latter term unless asked about it explicitly. She identifies as a Christian, and says she can be “spiritual without being religious”. Marie feels that BDSM “fulfils a need” in her life, but has not thought about the nature of that need because “I’m somebody that doesn’t question reasons very much at all”.

Matt identifies as a slave, although he did not have a Mistress at the time we spoke. He views both religion and spirituality as being focussed on things outside the world, and does not see himself this way. He describes kink as more “carnal”, as it derives from “that human nature, that primal desire... that I would equate to eating or sex. It’s something that I need to find, something that drives me”.

M-Cat identifies as a Domme, and has done some professional work in that capacity. Her kink “makes me feel powerful”. M-Cat is a Christian and, although she recognised spiritual

possibilities in kink, was clear that she did not need to explore these because she already has her religion.

Michael describes himself as Dom in terms of his relationship to Molly, but says that if he plays with other people he is a top or a “stunt-arm”. Michael has “rather strong opinions about religion. Mostly that it is very bad for society in general and people specifically, outside of a very certain framework”. He sees spirituality as “a separate thing” which is “whatever makes that indefinable part of you sing and be happy” and says that “you could say that the way [Molly and I] practice BDSM is spiritual between us, because it communicates the ineffable between us”.

Mistress Marina identifies as a Domme; she lives with a full time slave and plays with other submissives. She describes herself as spiritual, saying that “spirituality is ... an innate need in everybody... we're all searching for it and finding it in different ways. Spirituality is a connection. To the divine, whatever you see [that] as. It doesn't have to be a thing or a person, it could be nature... its feeling connected”. She feels BDSM is an aspect of this for her “because of the feeling of wholeness, because of the feeling of almost ... separation from the physicality. Because of the feeling of power”.

Molly is a submissive in a committed D/s relationship with Michael. Molly says that religion “sadly, it means judging people. Based on your very narrow-minded view”. She also wants “to reject” spirituality as a loaded term, but says she does have “a deep, for want of a better word, spiritual life...Through our relationship, through discovering things about myself that I love ... [sometimes] there's a kind of intense moment, a spiritual moment where you just... that inner part of you just goes this is peace. This is perfect. For no other reason than it just is”. She says this is “absolutely, absolutely” a quality of experience play can create.

Ms Lucy is a Domme; she has a committed relationship with a single slave and considers play an expression of that relationship. She considers spirituality to be “the state of mind that is self-aware of the entire being: mind, body and soul... And how we're all inter-connected”. Kink contributes to this for her because “it's a tool that touches our spirituality, sexuality, physical pleasures, pain... it allows us to be creative.... It's a gateway to feel emotionally connected”.

Nomad describes himself as a top who switches very occasionally, he is also a Tantra practitioner and sees substantial overlaps between what he does as Tantra and what he does as kink. He does not consider himself religious but says that “spirituality is more about people. It's more about... being with oneself” and he can relate to that term although whether he would use it “depends on who I'm with!”. He says that BDSM “can very much push you down that journey” towards understanding.

Oliver is a Dom, who says that he can be sadistic but has struggled with choosing that as a label. He regards spiritual activity as something pursued as an end in itself, and he cannot be spiritual as he has goals for what he does. He says that BDSM can be “transformative for some people... [and it's] helping me learn much more about myself... BDSM has made me reassess the bits of my life that I wasn't happy with and helped me change”.

Paolo said that, at the time we met, he was “undecided” about his kink identity and felt he would have to describe himself as a switch and a hedonist. Paolo says “if I've got a religion at all it's Buddhism”, but he feels he is on a personal spiritual journey of which kink is a part. Such a journey is spiritual in nature because it contributes to “getting in touch with the universe”.

Penny identifies as a sub. She is also a little, at least in terms of her relationship with Piers. She is a Catholic but “I don't go to Mass regularly”. She was fairly new to the kink Scene at

the time we met, but feels finding it has “made me more confident. More accepting... of how I was”.

Piers describes himself as a daddy, at least in terms of his relationship with Penny; he says he is “a mirror for what my partner needs. I can even be a bottom, but that's rare”. He is a Christian and doesn't distinguish religion and spirituality. He says that he finds play liberating because “when you are playing with someone the rest of the world doesn't matter”.

poppy is a lifestyle submissive in a committed D/s relationship with Barry. She doesn't distinguish religion and spirituality and identifies as a Christian. For poppy her personal relationship with God is the heart of her religion because “for me religion has to have a head, a top, a dominant Because there has to be something that you can channel your needs to and your questions to – should I do this, or should I do this?” She sees the expression of her kink through play is fundamental to her well-being, without it “I think I'd probably just explode”.

pussikin describes herself as submissive, but “not service focussed... more of a pet”. She also considers herself a masochist. She is a witch, and regards religion and spirituality as effectively the same; she considers her kink to be spiritual because “it is the thing that helps me see the world as it is, and travel between worlds and such. If it is powerful – and we've been talking like it is – it is spiritual power”.

Rita says that she is a switch, although at the time we spoke she has only taken the bottom role in play. She is polyamorous and in a primary relationship with Friedrich. She says that religion is “interesting, because everybody says that its god. But it's not really, is it? It's the following of. So, football can be a religion. Obviously God and church and stuff,

but there's all the different ones. But I sort of, follow each of my religions". This includes BDSM which helps to fulfil "the need to feel connected".

Rocks is a switch who says he mostly tops "for practical reasons", as his regular partners prefer to bottom. He says religion "seems to be a good way of starting an argument these days!" and spirituality "is one of those words that has been bandied about to cover a multitude of feelings". He doesn't feel "particularly spiritual" but he can see why people choose that word to describe BDSM "when the energy is right, when the feelings are right". His kink "means quite important things... It's strengthening the relationship. It's the feelings of intensity.... From the canes to the floggers to the cuddling up afterwards, to the look in her eyes of 'yes, you are my partner, you are important to me'".

Rosie identifies as a submissive and says her kink is "very much a part of my identity and its very much emotional satisfaction". She is not religious and is unsure about whether anything she does is spiritual, which she considers to be "very much a self-defined kind of thing".

Rudge describes himself as a switch, who tops men and subs to women. He is not religious, and sees spirituality as "like a light religion. A slim-line one". His kink is important to him because "it is so different to my normal life" and it enables him to learn new things, such as his ability to endure (and even like) things "I thought I'd never handle at all".

Shaun identifies as a Dom. He sees religion as "a bunch of hogwash", involving doctrine and rules and spirituality "as more of an individual's ability to think for themselves regarding faith and religion". He says that spirituality "makes you certain of what you are, and hopefully comfortable in what you are", but while BDSM does do these things for him thinking of it as spiritual practice "just doesn't resonate with me".

Simon/Effie identifies as a TV sub; when dressed he becomes Effie. He says “being Effie, it's transforming. It allows me to be a kind of pretend woman and to be things that I can't express as a man”. He does not think of himself in terms of religion or spirituality but can see how BDSM might be described in those terms as “it's out of the mundane; it's out of the ordinary. It's not just 9 to 5. It's not just feeding your face it's... it's almost an icon isn't it? It becomes something very special”.

Stoney-face identifies as a collared switch; he has a Mistress, but when he plays with other people he does not always take the bottom role. Stoney-face is a shaman, and describes this as spirituality. His kink and shamanic identities are fully integrated and having come to understand this “I can now practice a form of kink spiritual BDSM, a spiritual kink. That's how I play when I'm playing right with energy play, the kind of thing that incorporates more spiritual elements than just knowing how to hit somebody with a crop”.

Twisted is a switch within her relationship with Digi and together they have explored various kinks that they did not initially expect to enjoy. She says she has “always detested religion” and has “not really thought” about spirituality in relation to herself, but describes “spiritual love” within their kink community where “you're all in the same boat, and you all have the same kind of interests”.

Will is a switch who plays with CP and impact play. He is not religious and says “I don't know what [spirituality] means... I just think it's a bit silly”. He does think of his kink as meaningful, and says he can't think of a better word to describe it; it is “extremely important... it's part of who I am”, and he says “I think if it wasn't [meaningful] I wouldn't be doing it”

Appendix C – Statement of Consent

The following statement was read aloud at the start of each recorded conversation:

I confirm that I understand this is a study about BDSM. I have read the information for participants, and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and my part in it. I confirm that I have been offered contact details of a third party at the Open University with whom I can discuss any issues or concerns. I have been assured that no personal data which could be used to identify me is being collected and that my contact details will be stored securely. I confirm that I am over 18 at the date of this interview.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time prior to publication of the material. I can withdraw consent verbally and without giving a reason for doing so.

I agree to take part in the study and to the conversation being audio-recorded. If I withdraw my consent I understand that this audio recording will be destroyed. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes from this conversation in publications.